“Stories of Things Remote: (Re)Placing the Self in 19th-century Adventure Fiction”

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ABSTRACT

Timothy Scott Hayes: “Stories of Things Remote: (Re)Placing the Self in 19th-century Adventure Fiction”
(Under the direction of John McGowan)

In this dissertation, I argue that, rather than offering mere escapist distractions from their own troubled societies or simply reinforcing imperial ideologies, adventure novels by Melville, Stevenson, and Conrad directly explore the challenges of maintaining a stable self in the newly globalized spaces of the nineteenth century. Exploring the myriad possibilities of life in colonial spaces, these novels portray the struggles of European and American characters to adjust to the complex spaces of the colonial world. Departing from their relatively homogeneous societies in search of “adventure,” these characters must create new justifying narratives to explain their tenuous lives in the challenging environments that they encounter. Utilizing narrative theory as well as contemporary definitions of space, I analyze the harrowing realities that these novels often present about the costs of failed imperial ideologies and practices on individual selves. Embarking on their adventures with a strong belief in their own moral superiority, these novels’ protagonists soon realize, often in shattering ways, that the new world they have entered openly resists the grand narratives they have come to believe. Responding to the collapse of these justifying narratives, these adventurers, both consciously and unconsciously, struggle to fashion new narratives that will allow them to survive. Created as colonial efforts reached their peak in both Britain and the United States, these
novels represent a crucial early attempt to imagine identity in the multicultural contexts that colonial efforts produced.
To my parents, Frank and Glenda Hayes
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Chapter 1
“All Varieties Were Welded into Oneness”:
Imagining Identity Amid Diversity in Melville’s Moby-Dick

Ye two are the opposite poles of one thing; Starbuck is Stubb reversed, and Stubb is Starbuck; and ye two are all mankind; and Ahab stands alone among the millions of the peopled earth, nor gods nor men his neighbors!

Moby-Dick

They were one man, not thirty. For as the one ship that held them all; though it was put together of all contrasting things—oak, and maple, and pine wood; iron, and pitch, and hemp—yet all these ran into each other in the one concrete hull, which shot on its way, both balanced and directed by the long central keel; even so, all the individualities of the crew, this man’s valor, that man’s fear; guilt and guiltlessness, all varieties were welded into oneness, and were all directed to that fatal goal which Ahab their one lord and keel did point to.

Moby-Dick

Utopias afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold; they open up cities with vast avenues, superbly planted gardens, countries where life is easy, even though the road to them is chimical. Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy “syntax” in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also the less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to “hold together.” This is why utopias permit fables and discourse: they run with the very grain of language and are part of the fundamental dimension of the fibula; heterotopias (such as those to be found so often in Borges) dessicate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences.

Foucault, The Order of Things

In 1851, when Herman Melville published his novel Moby-Dick, a novel he imagined as a “romance of adventure” (as he described it in a May 1, 1850 letter to Richard H. Dana Jr.), he did so in the complete absence of an American tradition of adventure fiction. American society remained sharply divided over questions of race, as the recent Compromise of 1850, a group of laws passed to ensure a continuing balance
between slave and free states, had made vividly clear. In England, the rampant poverty of the Hungry Forties had begun to subside, but the effects of rapid industrialization continued to generate substantial social and economic inequities. But English readers were now facing their problems without the aid of Frederick Marryat, whose death in 1848 had brought to an end a prolific career during which his immensely popular sea stories and adventure tales had provided a necessary escapist antidote to the natural pessimism of the time. Given this escapist tradition, Melville might have easily written stories that would have served a similar role for readers in the troubled United States of his time, reassuring a nation not far removed from a war with Mexico and still holding firm in its belief in the “manifest destiny” that Americans could easily assert control over any space. But Melville could not become an American Marryat, for he had experienced a different world, a place in which racial prejudices could be overwhelmed by close quarters and a common goal. As Timothy Marr has argued, “Unlike many Americans of his time, Melville refused to repress his exposure to the enigma of human variety. Instead, he actively celebrated it as a fresh and original dimension of a new world literature that lay claim to a more global genealogy” (135). An author who had already demonstrated a marked admiration and respect for nonwestern cultures and societies in his early exotic novels like Typee (1846) and Omoo (1847), Melville created in Moby-Dick a work that not only had a powerful effect on Hawthorne and the American novel writ large but that also established a radically new rationale and method for adventure fiction. While Marryat’s tales had offered energetic and nostalgic stories to weary readers that looked backward to the glory and nobility of Lord Nelson’s British navy, Melville chose instead to confront the deeply entrenched prejudices of his country in his own time.
In doing so, he offered both sobering examples of such prejudice and remarkably optimistic, even utopian glimpses of the limitless capacity of humans joined in common effort. At the same time, Melville’s chosen narrator, Ishmael, lived out a transformation that adventure fiction would soon experience, in part because of novels like *Moby-Dick*: beginning his “adventure” as a means of escaping the pressures of society, Ishmael slowly discovers that adventure, particularly in the multicultural spaces of 19th-century ships, offers much more than a chance for escape. It provides an opportunity to redefine individual identity beyond the reach of what Ishmael calls “insular prejudices” in the context of an increased understanding and acceptance of cultures beyond his own (71).

While the idea of “adventure” was present in fiction at least as early as *Robinson Crusoe* and certainly dominated the romantic fictions of Walter Scott early in the nineteenth century, the genre of adventure fiction soon came to occupy a more substantial role in both portraying and to some extent promoting the imperial ambitions of England during the century’s latter half. As Andrea White explains in *Joseph Conrad and the Adventure Tradition* (1993), such adventure fiction in England “purported to chronicle the English adventure in the lands beyond Europe then being explored and colonized” and simultaneously “formed the energizing myth of English imperialism” (6). In addition to Marryat, authors like Robert Ballantyne, G.A. Henty, and H. Rider Haggard each made explicit claims of authenticity for their adventure fiction that were founded on their experience in the lands that they portrayed—and they were usually credited as such (White 45). Even as claims for realism increased, however, early and mid-Victorian

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1Melville spoke similarly of the capacity for sailors from diverse backgrounds to come together in *White-Jacket*, written the year before *Moby Dick*. In both novels, it is primarily the leaders of each ship that prevent such common effort from achieving useful results.
adventure fiction continued to offer uncomplicated and fairly jingoistic depictions of imperial endeavor. At the same time, Patrick Brantlinger argues, imperialism became increasingly virulent in its racial attitudes late in the nineteenth century, providing “an ideological safety valve, deflecting both working-class radicalism and middle-class reformism into noncritical paths” (34-35). Despite the broader attempts by government to redirect such social resentment, however, some late Victorian authors of adventure fiction, most notably Stevenson and Conrad, rejected the genre’s escapist reputation and instead created fiction that offered few consolations for the imperial believers among their readership. In doing so, they sought to impact attitudes not only about imperial enterprises but also about the very real challenges to imperialists’ ability to maintain their identity that awaited them in the colonial world. In the 1890s, these authors used the genre that had contributed to the “energizing myth” of imperialism to expose what Christopher GoGwilt calls “the willed forgetfulness required to imagine a European cultural and political history disconnected from its colonial entanglements” (86). In addition to these important studies in the 1990s by White and GoGwilt (and Brantlinger in the 1980s), more recent considerations of this adventure fiction have focused on authors’ presentation of gender, especially Andrew Michael Roberts’ *Conrad and Masculinity* (2000) and LeeAnne Richardson’s *New Woman and Colonial Adventure Fiction in Victorian Britain: Gender, Genre, and Empire* (2006). But no one has yet fully considered the crucial role that narrative plays in protecting and sometimes redefining identity in the adventure fiction of Melville, Stevenson, and Conrad.
After uttering arguably the most famous opening sentence in modern literature, Ishmael begins his narrative with an extended and matter-of-fact explanation of his decision to go to sea that belies the complex lessons that he will ultimately learn from his ordeal aboard the Pequod.

Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people’s hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. (18)

Oppressed by the mundane and depressing effects of living in the “insular city of Manhattoes” (18), Ishmael offers an explanation of his choice to become a sailor that makes it merely a more exciting and adventurous equivalent of purchasing the latest miracle tonic being sold on Manhattan’s streets. Going to sea in this simplistic formulation is about overcoming depression and hypochondria, of searching for sunnier weather and fresh air to breathe. Seeking to escape a life “tied to counters, nailed to benches, [or] clinched to desks,” Ishmael also attempts to discover the “green fields” whose existence he and his fellow Manhattans so strongly seem to doubt (19). But if such a desire suggests Ishmael’s main interest in the voyage is a Romantic reconnection with nature after too much time spent in the squalor of New York, his final formulation of his decision to become a whaler makes clear the novel’s inescapable ties to the tradition of Marryat. Explaining that the “great whale” and the extreme conditions in which he dwells “would not have been inducements” for many, Ishmael insists, “as for me, I am

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2This and subsequent quotations from Moby-Dick will refer to Moby-Dick (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002).
tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote. I love to sail forbidden seas, and land on barbarous coasts” (22). Ishmael, like many young men in comparable sea stories, insists he will happily face danger for the glory of glimpsing “things remote.” Yet nowhere does he express even the slightest interest in or awareness of the diverse humans who live on such “barbarous coasts,” much less that he will soon join a crew made up partially of “savages.” In this way, his ambitions mirror the exoticism behind numerous travel narratives available at the time, which were largely content to describe the breathtaking landscapes of faraway lands without ever considering the potential harm produced by colonial incursions. In its opening chapter, *Moby-Dick* presents a young man seeking escape and adventure, echoing the early aims of adventure fiction. And also like that early adventure fiction, Ishmael betrays no sense that his identity may be challenged by this new adventure.

Even before he departs for sea, however, Ishmael encounters the remarkable diversity among sailors in the port town of New Bedford. In the process, he demonstrates a surprising openness to this motley collection of civilized Yankees and “actual cannibals” who stroll along the same streets (41). And while part of his celebration of this scene derives from his seemingly impish delight at the obvious shock of the New Englanders, Ishmael also is more willing to accept such a sight because of the fast friendship he has already achieved with Queequeg. Indeed, once he overcomes his visual revulsion at Queequeg’s appearance, Ishmael discovers that his new friend displays an impressive ability to adapt to this strange new environment, thousands of miles from his home. While New Bedforders either hurry by or stare at their foreign visitors—and would
likely be even more alarmed to walk the streets of Queequeg’s home village,

Kokovoko—Ishmael notes Queequeg’s calm and untroubled existence in New Bedford:

I had noticed also that Queequeg never consorted at all, or but very little, with the other seamen in the inn. He made no advances whatever; appeared to have no desire to enlarge the circle of his acquaintances. All this struck me as mighty singular; yet, upon second thoughts, there was something almost sublime in it. Here was a man some twenty thousand miles from home [. . .] thrown among people as strange to him as though he were in the planet Jupiter; and yet he seemed entirely at his ease; preserving the utmost serenity; content with his own companionship; always equal to himself. (55)

Having now seen the diverse individuals who constitute the crews of whalers like the one he will soon join, Ishmael demonstrates an awareness of the challenges that such multicultural spaces might offer. And yet he seems reassured by his friend Queequeg’s ability to adjust to vastly different situations. Interestingly, while many of Ishmael’s comments about and descriptions of the Pequod’s crew focus on the camaraderie among its members, especially in moments of frivolity, Ishmael’s approach to his new life aboard the remarkably heterogeneous Pequod does not differ greatly from Queequeg’s. As a number of critics have noted, Ishmael describes few interactions between himself and other members of the crew and none between him and the ship’s leaders. Indeed, though a substantial portion of Ishmael’s narrative centers on Ahab, as John Wenke notes, “As a sailor, Ishmael never directly engages Ahab. In fact as far as Ahab is concerned, Ishmael is just another contemptible integer in ‘a mob of unnecessary duplicates’” (702).

Maintaining a low profile aboard the Pequod yet constantly observing his fellow sailors, Ishmael seems to revel in his diverse and vibrant environment, particularly early in the voyage. During the famous chapter “Midnight, Forecastle,” during which Ishmael
abandons traditional prose and records the celebrations as though he were composing Shakespearean drama, Melville’s chosen narrator fades almost completely into the background. Immediately following this chapter, however, Ishmael reasserts his voice and his place among the crew, confirming his embrace of a more communitarian sense of his self. “I, Ishmael, was one of that crew; my shouts had gone up with the rest; my oath had been welded with theirs,” he affirms, demonstrating his willing incorporation into the society of the ship (152). Having successfully escaped the “fancied superiority” and “insular prejudices” of American culture, Ishmael appreciates what he considers the simpler and infinitely less pretentious life of a whaler. Despite this general acceptance and even celebration of his fellow crewmates, however, Ishmael still struggles to move past those very prejudices that he has fled, including a harsh moment just a few pages after his affirmation that he “was one of that crew.” Concluding the chapter that comprehensively reveals the burgeoning mythology of Moby Dick, Ishmael, perhaps in a moment of epistemological frustration, offers a cynical assessment of his situation that also includes a withering portrayal of the Pequod’s crew:

Here, then, was this grey-headed, ungodly old man, chasing with curses a Job’s whale round the world, at the head of a crew, too, chiefly made up of mongrel renegades, and castaways, and cannibals—morally enfeebled also, by the incompetence of mere unaided virtue or right-mindedness in Starbuck, the invulnerable jollity of indifference and recklessness in Stubb, and the pervading mediocrity in Flask. [. . .] How it was that they so abundantly responded to the old man’s ire—by what evil magic their souls were possessed, that at times his hate seemed all theirs; the White Whale as much their insufferable foe as his; [. . .] all this to explain, would be to dive deeper than Ishmael can go. (158, emphasis added)

Perhaps what is most striking about this unsentimental description is not Ishmael’s cavalier categorization of the men that he had embraced so recently as his comrades (“mongrel renegades,” “castaways,” “cannibals”) but his insistent exclusion of himself
from that crew. “They” respond too easily to Ahab’s will; Moby Dick is “their” foe as much as Ahab’s—but Ishmael no longer views himself as part of the Pequod’s “we,” a stunning reversal that makes clear that redefining his identity in the multicultural space of the ship is a more complicated and uneven process than his earlier pronouncements would suggest.

Ishmael cannot entirely escape his own prejudices, but they manifest themselves not so much in his actions as in his descriptions. For instance, moments after the surprising revelation of Ahab’s boat of Malay stowaways, Ishmael explains that these mysterious men represent “a race notorious for a certain diabolism of subtilty, and by some honest white mariners supposed to be the paid spies and secret confidential agents on the water of the devil, their lord, whose counting-room they suppose to be elsewhere” (181). Initially, he is able to disguise his prejudice by attributing such ideas to the opinions of other “honest white mariners.” But his following description of Fedallah’s first words as a “half-hissed reply” more clearly exposes Ishmael’s misgivings and the potential survival of the “insular prejudices” he so strongly resents (181). While a case could be made that these racist descriptions portray only Ishmael’s initial, almost instinctive response to Fedallah and thus mirror his early revulsion at the sight of Queequeg, his depiction of the mysterious Parsee and others of similar racial background never sheds this devilish connotation. In “The Grand Armada,” as the Pequod passes through the straits of Sunda between Java and Sumatra in pursuit of a whale herd, a group of Malays in turn pursues the ship. While the Pequod’s speed assures that it will not be caught, however, Ishmael’s depiction of this moment and Ahab’s reaction to it seem more reminiscent of the unreflective adventure fiction that preceded Melville’s career
than his own paradigm-shifting work. Somewhat surprisingly, Ahab views the Malays’ actions as a positive omen: “how very kind of these tawny philanthropists to assist in speeding [the Pequod] on to her chosen pursuit” (299). But Ishmael does not view them in such a benign way, characterizing them both as “bloodthirsty pirates” and, more shockingly, “a herd of remorseless wild pirates and inhuman atheistical devils” (299).

Ishmael is largely able to embrace the widely divergent beliefs and practices aboard the Pequod, it seems, overcoming the racial prejudices toward dark-skinned individuals like Queequeg that dominated America at the time. But he seemingly fails to realize that similarly bigoted ideas about “Asiatic” or “Oriental” people might be equally flawed. At the same time, it is difficult to imagine the older Ishmael who often celebrates diversity and who comfortably relates “The Town-Ho’s Story” in a Peruvian bar endorsing such narrow-mindedness. Perhaps, then, Ishmael’s essentialized descriptions of Malays in Moby-Dick owe more to a young man still sorting out his beliefs than the older voice who looks back on a time before he successfully adapted to the multicultural realities of his life as a sailor.

Though he may not entirely escape the “insular prejudices” of American society, Ishmael does demonstrate a growing awareness that his voyage aboard the Pequod presents him with an opportunity to remake himself and his worldview. Ironically, this ability to recreate his identity becomes clear only after Ishmael’s near drowning at sea. Noting how his traumatic ordeal made “a thing most momentous now [seem] but a part of the general joke,” Ishmael explains, “There is nothing like the perils of whaling to breed this free and easy sort of genial, desperado philosophy; and with it I now regarded this whole voyage of the Pequod, and the great White Whale its object” (188). But, rather
than sinking him into pessimistic despair, his survival drives him to accept the constant perils of whaling and to embrace the idea of evolving a new self. After updating his will with Queequeg’s assistance, Ishmael relates the powerful calming effect of this act:

After the ceremony was concluded upon the present occasion, I felt all the easier; a stone was rolled away from my heart. Besides, all the days I should now live would be as good as the days that Lazarus lived after his resurrection; a supplementary clean gain of so many months or weeks as the case might be. I survived myself [... ] (189)

Only months removed from a mundane life that likely would have gone on for years and that offered few physical perils, Ishmael now fully accepts the tenuous “new” life that he has chosen, one whose remainder may be measured in months or even weeks. Having “survived” himself and now increasingly committed to his new existence aboard the Pequod, Ishmael evolves a new sense of self based more on communal purpose and unity than on his individual desires and beliefs.

Even as his narrative focuses more exhaustively on the intricacies of the whaling process, Ishmael reveals his growing sense of solidarity with the crew in brief but illuminating moments during his long discourses. In a chapter ostensibly about various artistic representations of whales, Ishmael expresses admiration for Hawaiian “savages” who create intricate likenesses from various substances including shark’s teeth. But he also prefaces this description with a broader observation about such “savages” and their reputations among “civilized” peoples:

Long exile from Christendom and civilization inevitably restores a man to that condition in which God placed him, i.e. what is called savagery. Your true whale-hunter is as much a savage as an Iroquois. I myself am a savage, owing no allegiance but to the King of the Cannibals; and ready at any moment to rebel against him. (222)
Ishmael, celebrating his escape from “Christendom and civilization,” now proclaims himself both a “true whale-hunter” and thus a “savage.” Similar to this declaration but in even more ecstatic tones, Ishmael later describes a utopian scene of camaraderie and harmony that accompanies the squeezing of the case in the chapter “A Squeeze of the Hand.” Beginning what initially seems like only another fact-laden explanation of a familiar process, Ishmael quickly slips into an extended and overtly sensual description of handling the sperm. Affirming how this moment overwhelmed any negative feelings within him, Ishmael explains, “I forgot all about our horrible oath; in that inexpressible sperm, I washed my hands and my heart of it; [. . .] while bathing in that bath, I felt divinely free from all ill-will, or petulance, or malice, of any sort whatsoever” (322).

Absent Ahab’s fatal desire for revenge, Ishmael suggests that the life of a whaler could generate a multiethnic society dominated by kindness and generosity, a reality not yet achieved in Melville’s world (and, arguably, still not achieved). Further, moving beyond Ishmael’s feelings of affection and unity in this moment, the older Ishmael who tells the story adds a more expansive call for this kind of unity.

Oh! my dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humor or envy! Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness. Would that I could keep squeezing that sperm for ever! For now, by many prolonged, repeated experiences, I have perceived that in all cases man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity [. . .] (323)

Combining the strength of his memory of utopian moments like the squeezing of the case with more bitter experiences in the world since his survival of the Pequod’s foundering, Ishmael longs for a better world, one that is sustained by “the very milk and sperm of kindness.” And he imagines such a world could be achieved only through an almost
complete blurring of distinctions based on race, just as the sperm covers all hands and erases all differences in skin color. But he also seems to recognize that the individual transformation that he has experienced is infinitely more difficult to achieve on a societal level.

Much like his friend Queequeg, Ishmael seems to encounter relatively few difficulties in adapting to the multiethnic realities of life aboard the *Pequod* (though his role as narrator of his own experience leaves some doubt as to whether it was as easy as he makes it sound). But his counterparts in the adventure fiction of Stevenson and Conrad—Wiltshire in Stevenson’s *The Beach of Falesá* and the incomparable Marlow of *Heart of Darkness*, who both also relate their own experiences—make more evident the very real challenges that they face in adjusting to the complex, multicultural spaces of colonialism. While his views remain inconsistent and at times bigoted, Wiltshire is ultimately a white man who largely embraces his new life with a wife native to Falesá and several multiracial children. Marlow, widely known as a storyteller in his world and in ours, adapts to the challenging and unfamiliar environment of the Congo and ultimately creates a new narrative upon which to base his self by systematically observing the narratives that others generate in response to the incongruities of colonial spaces. In doing so, Marlow comes to understand that everyone, regardless of place or race, has his/her own justifying narrative, a lesson learned only by surviving the agonizing ordeal of his journey to save Kurtz. Thus, nearly half a century apart, Melville and Conrad came to similar conclusions about how to adjust to the increasingly heterogeneous world already apparent in the colonial world.
Of Utopias and Heterotopias: The Adventure Writer’s Dilemma

In the preface to one of the most significant studies of Melville in recent years, *Modernity at Sea: Melville, Marx, Conrad in Crisis* (2002), Cesare Casarino examines two separate instances in which Michel Foucault used the term “heterotopia.” The first, which occurred in a 1967 lecture entitled “Of Other Spaces,” focused on the heterotopia as an actual and unique space:

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places [. . .] which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. (178)

Seizing on this spatial description of the heterotopia as well as Foucault’s assertion that the “ship is the heterotopia par excellence,” Casarino identifies Foucault’s claims as the “historical and conceptual cue” for a study that ultimately asserts that the modernist sea narrative of the nineteenth century portrays the ship as a place of constant crisis and, thus, an enduring symbol of modernity (13). But, only a year before this lecture, as Casarino also notes, Foucault had considered the heterotopia in a different sense, exploring its potential as a representational rather than a strictly spatial category. In his preface to *The Order of Things*, Foucault explains the distinction between utopias and heterotopias in this evocative way:

> Utopias afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold; they open up cities with vast avenues, superbly planted gardens, countries where life is easy, even though the road to them is chimerical. Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy “syntax” in

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3The lecture was presented to the Architectural Studies Circle on March 14, 1967 (Foucault 175n). The printed text, which appears in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology* (New York: New Press, 1997), offers a much more elaborate series of definitions of the “heterotopia.”
advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also the less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to ‘hold together.’ (xviii, original emphasis)

Taking this earlier formulation of the nature of utopias and heterotopias as this project’s cue, I want to explore how authors of adventure fiction, particularly in the latter half of the nineteenth century, faced a persistent and complex choice in portraying the colonial spaces at the center of their works. Marryat and authors who largely mimicked his style (including, in some ways, H. Rider Haggard) created works that are predominantly utopian in their presentation, reassuring audiences that, whatever problems exist in their own country, the imperial endeavors of their governments continue to be both righteous and successful. They present a world of adventure that is “fantastic” but largely “untroubled” and in which life remains relatively “easy” despite the foreignness of their settings. Conversely, authors like Melville, Stevenson, and Conrad produced stories that, more often than not, portrayed their subjects in a more heterotopian manner. Refusing to console their audiences or to reinforce widely held prejudices, these authors sought to describe life in colonial spaces in all of its unevenness and complexity and to reveal how such spaces unsettle not only language but “the less apparent syntax which causes words and things [. . .] to ‘hold together.’” For Stevenson and Conrad, this intent related directly to their experience of actually seeing other men, particularly with ties to European imperialism, struggle to evolve a new self to meet the challenges that colonial spaces presented. Yet, as Ishmael makes clear through his narration, Melville had seen inside the world of whaling, an industry that had clear ties to the nascent imperial efforts of the United States in the mid-nineteenth century.
While *Moby-Dick* does not focus on imperialism per se, Ishmael’s attempts both to educate his audience about whaling and to celebrate his own experience aboard a whaler often lead him to hyperbolic descriptions of the endeavor that transform whaling into a veritable proxy for imperialism. Yet, in seeking to tell the tale of the diverse cast of characters aboard his ship, Ishmael also reveals the darker side of whaling life. Thus, Ishmael’s complicated presentation of the whaling industry mirrors the difficulties that Stevenson and Conrad would face in their own writing. Speaking as though Nantucket were an imperial nation unto itself, Ishmael proclaims, “Let America add Mexico to Texas, and pile Cuba upon Canada; let the English overswarm all India [. . .] two thirds of this terraqueous globe are the Nantucketer’s. For the sea is his; he owns it, as Emperors own empires” (65). In addition to this explicit connection of whaling men from Nantucket with imperialists from America and England, Ishmael also links whaling ships with the discovery of and initial missionary efforts in “seas and archipelagoes which had no chart, where no Cook or Vancouver had ever sailed” (99). Announcing the “whale-ship” as the “true mother” of the Australian colony, Ishmael also asserts, “For many years past the whale-ship has been the pioneer in ferreting out the remotest and least known parts of the earth” and that it also “cleared the way for the missionary and the merchant, and in many cases carried the primitive missionaries to their first destinations” (99). Most of these claims appear in a chapter called “The Advocate,” in which Ishmael argues at length for the nobility and importance of his chosen profession. And his tale does provide several instances in which the activities of a whaling ship produce a utopian commonality among crew members that casts the industry in a positive light. But Ishmael
counterbalances these ecstatic moments with honest and sometimes disturbing depictions of scenes where the darker capabilities of men like Stubb and Ahab reveal themselves.

As is already obvious from my treatment of Ishmael’s description of the squeezing of the case, *Moby-Dick* certainly portrays moments of utopian delight. Perhaps the two most important utopian scenes within Ishmael’s narrative are his description of the whaling ritual of the gam, in which two passing ships pause and share a celebration before continuing on their way, and the chase, which draws all thirty men aboard the *Pequod* together in common effort. Ishmael defines the gam in this way: “A social meeting of two (or more) Whale-ships, generally on a cruising-ground; when, after exchanging hails, they exchange visits by boat crews” (198). A unique hallmark of “the godly, honest, unostentatious, hospitable, sociable, free-and-easy whaler,” the gam also provides a chance to exchange letters from home for crucial information about the conditions of certain whaling grounds (197). And, given the common experiences of the sailors brought together by these gams, Ishmael further explains, they would exchange the whaling news, and have an agreeable chat. For not only would they meet with all the sympathies of sailors, but likewise with all the peculiar congenialities arising from a common pursuit and mutually shared privations and perils.

Nor would difference of country make any very essential difference; that is, so long as both parties speak one language, as is the case with Americans and English. (197)

Offering a brief respite from the rigors of whaling life and a chance to share common triumphs and complaints with men who faced the same conditions each day, gams help sailors subordinate their nationalistic and ethnic prejudices and to emphasize the

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4 As is also evident from the make-up of the *Pequod’s* crew, regular efforts to recruit additional crew members on various Pacific islands led to crews with members of quite diverse backgrounds, most of whom, like Queequeg, could speak at least some English (presumably because they learned it aboard ship or in contact with colonialists on their island). Thus, though gams might have been limited to American and English whalers, the members of the crews might have been from a number of other ethnic backgrounds.
experiences that bring them together. But the novel’s most compelling portrayal of the unity that can be achieved by humans through common effort occurs in the midst of Ishmael’s description of the second day of the Pequod’s fatal chase of Moby Dick. In an elaborate metaphor that compares the diverse members of the ship’s crew with the varied materials used to construct the ship, Ishmael asserts,

They were one man, not thirty. For as the one ship that held them all; though it was put together of all contrasting things—oak, and maple, and pine wood; iron, and pitch, and hemp—yet all these ran into each other in the one concrete hull, which shot on its way, both balanced and directed by the long central keel; even so, all the individualities of the crew, this man’s valor, that man’s fear; guilt and guiltlessness, all varieties were welded into oneness . . .] (415)

Celebrating the tremendous potential of the crew while also imagining the larger potential of all “individualities” in the world to come together and overcome difference, Ishmael speaks in glowing terms of how humans in common effort possess enormous power. In addition, at a time in history when many held ideologies that believed in the power of racial and rational purity, Melville confidently announces that the greatest promise from a combination of “all contrasting things” in which “all varieties [are] welded into oneness.” Yet, even in the midst of this powerful affirmation, Ishmael remains bitterly aware of the fate of all but one of those thirty, as he confirms that “all varieties were welded into oneness, and were all directed to that fatal goal which Ahab their one lord and keel did point to” (415). For, in addition to the unforgettable utopian experiences of his time aboard the Pequod, Ishmael also offers heterotopian portrayals of much more troubling events during the fateful voyage.

In addition to Ishmael’s surprisingly callous and vicious judgment of the crew that I have already examined, the most disturbing moments that Ishmael portrays concern
Stubb and his bigoted and cruel treatment of Pip and the ship’s cook, both of whom are dark-skinned and seem to be African-American. Pip, one of the youngest members of the Pequod’s crew, jumps out of Stubb’s boat during only his second pursuit of a whale, instantly halting the chase. Disgusted and angered by Pip’s inexperience, Stubb menacingly tells him, “Stick to the boat, or by the Lord, I wont [sic] pick you up if you jump; mind that. We can’t afford to lose whales by the likes of you; a whale would sell for thirty times what you would, Pip, in Alabama. Bear that in mind, and don’t jump any more” (320-21). Echoing more racist literature of Melville’s time, Stubb essentially threatens to sell Pip “down the river,” even though they are thousands of miles at sea. Despite Stubb’s warning, Pip again jumps from the boat during the next lowering, but his abandonment at sea and subsequent madness, ironically, does not occur because of any deliberate act by Stubb. Instead, as Ishmael explains, each whaling boat involved in the chase mistakenly assumes that another boat will pick him up. Regardless, this episode, especially given Stubb’s vicious threat to Pip, hardly paints an inviting picture of whaling. In addition, an earlier chapter entitled “Stubb’s Supper” gives more proof of Stubb’s racist beliefs, which are on display this time in what can best be described as his brutal, mean, and seemingly pointless bullying of the Pequod’s cook, a black man who is derisively called “Fleece” by the crew. Apparently disappointed over how a piece of whale-steak has been prepared, Stubb relentlessly patronizes the cook, forcing him to perform a number of meaningless tasks, including delivering a “sermon” to the sharks alongside the ship. This episode is even more disturbing because of the heavily stylized use of dialectical spelling and the troublingly simplistic portrayal of Fleece. Yet, disturbing though it is, a scene like this that exposes the uglier moments of life on the
*Pequod* demonstrates Ishmael’s willingness to portray the life of a sailor in all of its complexities. Nearly half a century later, Stevenson and Conrad would approach their main subject, life in colonial spaces, in much the same way that Ishmael handled his main subject, whaling: a balanced method that included both utopian and heterotopian portrayals of its complexities.

Following Melville’s example in altering the way that British adventure fiction portrayed life in the colonial world, Stevenson created two jarringly realistic novellas of the South Seas, a region in which he lived out the final years of his brief life (he died of a cerebral hemorrhage at the age of 44). In *The Beach of Falesá* (1893), a novella that Stevenson deemed the “first realistic South Sea story,” he offered a complicated picture of life on Falesá through the views of an opinionated and sometimes bigoted white man named Wiltshire. Focusing on Wiltshire’s economic battles to control the island’s trade with a clever and powerful white man named Case, Stevenson presents the unsympathetic and heterotopian realities of colonial life, particularly in the Pacific. In addition, Wiltshire’s narrative exposes Case’s attempts to manipulate the island’s population by portraying himself as in league with the devil—and, in the process, reveals how even white men in the Pacific had to evolve and create new narratives to ensure their success.

A year later, in a novella called *The Ebb-Tide* (1894), Stevenson portrays a trio of white beachcombers who face the same dilemma that adventure writers did: whether, in describing their lives not only to themselves but to their loved ones via farewell letters, they should construct utopian versions of their pathetic existence or bravely admit the heterotopian truth about themselves. Over the next two years, the career of Joseph Conrad began with two novels that relentlessly refuse to offer a utopian vision of any
aspect of life, *Almayer’s Folly* (1895) and *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896). Focused on two white men who fail miserably to adapt to the challenging and unstable political circumstances of Southeast Asia, Conrad also rejects any notion that the Malays, Europeans, or Arabs that occupy such spaces can find any common ground. In doing so, he created what might be more appropriately termed the adventure tragedy, a form so bleak and so committed to painting a disturbing picture that it threatens to move beyond heterotopian fiction to dystopia itself. However, in *Heart of Darkness*, a novella that brings to a close the adventure tradition of the nineteenth century, Conrad created an unflinchingly honest account of life in the Congo that nevertheless offered a quiet and subdued hope that Ishmael’s utopian dreams might eventually come to fruition in the broader world.

“**Ahab Stands Alone**: Ahab’s Rejection of Diversity and Nature

While Ishmael throws himself fully into the lively and heterogeneous life of the *Pequod*, his captain remains hidden from view until well into the voyage. Ahab, still tormented by the loss of his leg during his first confrontation with Moby Dick, holds himself even more aloof from his crew than most sea captains would. Even when he does emerge, Ahab continues to focus almost exclusively on his determination to hunt down his “adversary,” greeting each ship that the *Pequod* encounters by bluntly asking, “Hast thou seen the White Whale?” (252). Not surprisingly, he does not join his crew in their revelry during a chapter like “Midnight, Forecastle”; indeed, he rarely shows any demonstrable interest in learning more about his crew or the myriad cultures that they represent. This final voyage aboard the *Pequod* has nothing to do with identity for
Captain Ahab, whose whole being is now consumed by his fatal quest. In the figure of Ahab, Melville created an archetype that would be directly echoed in Stevenson’s creation of Attwater in his late novella *The Ebb-Tide* and, most indelibly, in Conrad’s Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*. All three share two crucial characteristics. The first is an almost exclusive interest not in understanding the multicultural world that they encounter but in achieving domination over it based on their own selfish ends. The second also involves domination, as they seek to assert absolute control over a particular space while believing in their special ability to do so. Even as Ishmael, Stevenson’s Wiltshire, and Conrad’s Marlow try to look beyond narrowly defined conceptions of identity as they encounter the heterogeneous spaces of the colonial world, Ahab, Attwater, and Kurtz maintain an absolute faith in their own ability to dominate their surroundings while blatantly ignoring the diversity around them.

Well before Ahab emerges on the *Pequod’s* deck with his “troubled master-eye” (109), Ishmael is assured by Captain Peleg of Ahab’s extensive experience with the world: “Ahab’s above the common; Ahab’s been in colleges, as well as ‘mong the cannibals; been used to deeper wonders than the waves; fixed his fiery lance in mightier, stranger foes than whales” (78). And Peleg further insists that this diverse exposure has made Ahab more complex than most common sailors or captains, punctuating his explanation by passionately insisting, “Ahab has his humanities!” (79). In addition, though Peleg never makes an explicit claim, there is some sense that these “humanities” might be expected to positively influence his treatment of the diverse members of his crew. Yet moments during which Ahab interacts with members of different ethnicities, including the stunning revelation that Ahab has recruited a handful of mysterious Malay
stowaways as his own personal whaling crew, most memorably expose how Ahab’s humanities are now frequently overwhelmed by his “one supreme purpose” of achieving “audacious, immitigable, and supernatural revenge” against the White Whale (170, 158). Up until this disclosure in the chapter titled “The First Lowering,” ethnic difference has had no noticeable effect on how individuals treat each other aboard the Pequod. But the startling appearance of these hidden Malays (particularly because they have remained hidden so long) leads Starbuck and even Stubb, whose racial prejudices are on full display elsewhere, to discount their race and focus instead on their contribution to the crew’s goal. Exhorting his boat’s crew to give their utmost effort, Stubb insists, “What is it you stare at? Those chaps in yonder boat? Tut! They are only five more hands come to help us—never mind from where—the more the merrier” (182). Similarly, in reply to Stubb’s query about his thoughts on the Malays, Starbuck explains, “Smuggled on board, somehow, before the ship sailed. […] A sad business, Mr. Stubb! (seethe her, seethe her, my lads!) but never mind, Mr. Stubb, all for the best” (183). Though they do so somewhat begrudgingly, then, both demonstrate a willingness to set aside racial prejudice because of a common purpose. But Ishmael’s characterization of Ahab’s thoughts during this chase points to the captain’s dehumanized perception of his crew. “Those tiger yellow creatures of his seemed all steel and whalebone; like five trip-hammers they rose and fell with regular strokes of strength” (183). Further, in contrast to his choice to include a lengthy example of Stubb’s skill at encouraging his crew, Ishmael deliberately

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5The one mild exception to this occurs in the midst of the revelry of “Midnight, Forecastle.” After the “Old Manx Sailor” notes an ominous “pitch black” spot in the sky, Daggoo replies, “What of that? Who’s afraid of black’s afraid of me! I’m quarried out of it!” Seeking to avert any potential confrontation, a man simply dubbed “Spanish Sailor” opines, “Aye, harpooneer, thy race is the undeniable dark side of mankind—devilish dark at that. No offence,” and Daggoo concedes (though “grimly,” as Melville notes), “None” (150).
omits Ahab’s exhortations of his crew, sheepishly pointing to the sensibilities of his readers who “live under the blessed light of the evangelical land” (186). He does, however, offer an unambiguous sense of the intensity and vulgarity with which Ahab implores his Malays to do his bidding: “Only the infidel sharks in the audacious seas may give ear to such words, when, with tornado brow, and eyes of red murder, and foam-glued lips, Ahab leaped after his prey” (186). Caught up in the chase, Ahab displays the raging anger and malice that drive his pursuit of Moby Dick. But, though his choice of and trust in the Malays seems to at least temporarily negate the prejudices of many of his crew, Ahab himself displays little “humanity” toward the Malays or even much awareness of their humanity, viewing them simply as cogs in a machine that will aid him in defeating his supposed nemesis. Ironically, in the same episode that ends with Ishmael being thrown into the sea and consequently embracing the chance to redefine his identity at sea, Ahab proves just how myopic his worldview has become, one that is now defined by a clear disregard for others that ultimately leads him to risk the lives of his crew in his fatal decision to pursue Moby Dick for a third day.

And yet, at least until Ahab actually glimpses the White Whale, the Pequod’s captain still proves himself capable of at least some genuine empathy. In the midst of his attempt to repair the ship’s log-line, Ahab notices the presence of Pip, whose response to his captain, filled with the loose and incoherent ramblings that mark his “madness,” leads to a swift rebuke from the Manxman. Having only moments earlier recognized how circumstances and perhaps even the gods seem determined to oppose him—“I crush the quadrant, the thunder turns the needles, and now the mad sea parts the log-line” (391)—Ahab surmises from Pip’s speech and his inability to see his “reflection in the vacant
pupils of [Pip’s eyes]” that the young man has gone mad (392). Viewing Pip as a fellow sufferer at the hands of the indifferent gods, Ahab reaches out to him in a startling moment of empathy and humanity.

Oh, ye frozen heavens! look down here. Ye did beget this luckless child, and have abandoned him, ye creative libertines. Here, boy; Ahab’s cabin shall be Pip’s home henceforth, while Ahab lives. Thou touchest my inmost centre, boy; thou art tied to me by cords woven of my heart-strings. (392)

Paternally offering his comfort and protection, Ahab looks past Pip’s African-American ethnicity, even allowing his hand to be tied together with Pip’s. In a moment that echoes Ishmael’s call for universal understanding and kindness in “A Squeeze of the Hand,” Ahab further insists, “see the omniscient gods oblivious of suffering man; and man, though idiotic, and knowing not what he does, yet full of the sweet things of love and gratitude. Come! I feel prouder leading thee by thy black hand, than though I grasped an Emperor’s!” (392). This is not Ahab’s only moment of empathy, as John Wenke notes how chapters like “The Pipe” and “The Sphynx” reveal “a rich, though repressed, sense of human affection and communal interdependence” within the Pequod’s captain (707). Despite this surprisingly enlightened and compassionate behavior toward Pip, though, it is Ahab’s brief remark only moments earlier that he will not let go of Pip’s hand “unless I should thereby drag thee to worse horrors than are here” that foreshadows Ahab’s final abandonment of his “humanities.” For it is Ahab who leads Pip and indeed the entire crew of the Pequod, whom he eventually imagines as mere extensions of himself, into the deadly horrors left in Moby Dick’s wake.

In the end, Ahab refuses to abandon his pursuit of Moby Dick because of two seemingly contradictory convictions. The first is made clear when Ahab, rejecting
Stubb’s claim that the destruction of Ahab’s boat represents an ill omen, insists on his unique ability to comprehend the complexities of the universe.

> If the gods think to speak outright to man, they will honorably speak outright; not shake their heads, and give an old wives’ darkling hint.—Begone! Ye two are all mankind; and Ahab stands alone among the millions of the peopled earth, nor gods nor men his neighbors! (413)

Disappointed that none of his crew share the intensity of his desire to kill Moby Dick and frustrated by his own inability to successfully fulfill his one wish, Ahab imagines himself to be set apart from all others and to stand alone in an innumerable crowd. Insistently announcing that only he knows what is best for his ship, Ahab later asserts his exceptional status (and reveals the depth of his monomania) by contending, “Ahab is forever Ahab, man. This whole act’s immutably decreed. ‘Twas rehearsed by thee and me a billion years before this ocean rolled. Fool! I am the Fates’ lieutenant; I act under orders” (418). Having determined that he acts on behalf of the “Fates,” Ahab reveals, in the midst of the feverish chase for Moby Dick, that he also believes that the men of his crew represent mere extensions of his own body, meant to do his will as readily as his own arms and leg. Imploring the Malays in his boat to renew their vigorous pursuit of the White Whale, Ahab exclaims, “Ye are not other men, but my arms and legs; and so obey me” (423). Though Starbuck quickly insists that “not too late is it, even now, the third day, to desist” (423), Ahab is indeed too far gone, disconnected from any sense of the humanity around him or the imminent peril that he has placed them in. Only moments later, neither their race nor their selves matter any more, as all but Ishmael are lost beneath the waves. Rather than disregarding their race in a positive and enlightened gesture, Ahab ignores his crew members’ very humanity.
Ultimately, Ahab and the entire crew of the Pequod—except for Ishmael—perish as Moby Dick destroys the ship. And Ishmael’s recounting of the immediate aftermath of this catastrophe points beyond Ahab’s maniacal pursuit of Moby Dick to his sustained defiance of nature throughout the novel; indeed, his behavior, in addition to confirming the death of his “humanities,” proves how he has also “lost that sense of the full awfulness of the sea which aboriginally belongs to it” and forgotten (or willfully ignored) the fact that, “[p]lanting and snorting like a mad battle steed that has lost its rider, the masterless ocean overruns the globe” (224). Describing those hauntingly quiet moments just after the Pequod founders, Ishmael recounts, “Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago” (427).

Ahab’s attempt to master nature begins much earlier, though, in a chapter titled “The Quarter-Deck,” in which the Pequod’s captain urges his crew to endorse his pursuit of Moby Dick. Startled by Starbuck’s reluctance to endorse his singular aim and assertion that “[t]o be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab, seems blasphemous” (139), Ahab intensifies his already forceful rhetoric, essentially declaring war on all nature while also insisting that he can master what Ishmael will soon deem “masterless”:

 Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I’d strike the sun if it insulted me. For could the sun do that, then could I do the other; since there is ever a sort of fair play herein, jealousy presiding over all creations. But not my master, man, is even that fair play. Who’s over me? (140)

Emboldened by decades of sailing the seas while displaying mastery over nature’s grandest creation, the whale, yet also enraged by his failure to master the White Whale, Ahab imagines himself to be on at least an equal footing with all nature.
Much later in the voyage, however, a series of frustrating circumstances shakes Ahab’s belief and threatens to undermine his ability to control his crew. But Ahab remains unbowed, insisting, “I crush the quadrant, the thunder turns the needles, and now the mad sea parts the log-line. But Ahab can mend all” (391). This symbolic chain of events relentlessly signals how Ahab and his Pequod have lost their way, leaving them directionless though still, unfortunately, not masterless. Ahab destroys the ship’s quadrant not only because of its continual inability to locate the White Whale but also because it serves as a constant reminder of the limits of his own knowledge of both the present and the future. Cursing the quadrant moments before its destruction, Ahab complains,

> what after all canst thou do, but tell the poor, pitiful point, where thou thyself happenest to be on this wide planet, and the hand that holds thee: no! not one jot more! Thou canst not tell where one drop of water or one grain of sand will be to-morrow noon; and yet with thy impotence thou insultest the sun! (378)

Ahab’s demolition of the ship’s most reliable directional tool, one that is dependent on the sun’s position in the sky, ostensibly represents Ahab’s rejection of “the heavens” and the omniscience that he grants them. But the captain protests too much, blaming the quadrant for knowing nothing of the future and thus “insult[ing] the sun”—a realization of a threat Ahab boldly makes early in the voyage. Only a short time later, a violent thunderstorm mars the ship’s compass, and Ahab decides to build a replacement for two crucial reasons. The first, as Ishmael notes, is “to revive the spirits of his crew by a stroke of his subtile skill, in a matter so wondrous as that of the inverted compasses” (389). But Ahab’s act clearly has more to do with his own endeavor to prove his mastery over the elements and to show himself capable of guiding his ship without any aid from the
“heavens.” “Look ye, for yourselves, if Ahab be not lord of the level loadstone! The sun is East, and that compass swears it!” Ahab triumphantly proclaims moments after successfully constructing a new compass (390). But this moment of satisfaction is quickly undercut by Ishmael, who already knows the failed end of Ahab’s attempts to master nature: “In his fiery eyes of scorn and triumph, you then saw Ahab in all his fatal pride” (390). From his intentional destruction of the quadrant to his skillful creation of a new compass, Ahab is able to convince himself and at least some of his crew that he possesses the ability and the willpower to overcome any obstacles the sea might produce. But Ahab’s “control” over nature proves illusory, as he is ultimately incapable of seeking a balance with nature that is suggested by the benignity of chapters like “The Grand Armada” and “The Symphony.” Yearn though he sometimes does for such “blessed calms” (373), Ahab’s decision to consider nature his adversary denies him that chance.

Ultimately, while Ishmael comes to embrace the diversity and heterogeneity of life aboard the Pequod (especially in retrospect as the narrator of the story), “Ahab stands alone” not only from his fellow human beings but from all of nature. In doing so, Ahab exhibits a belief in his special ability to control space and to overcome any natural obstacles that strongly echoes Americans’ belief in “manifest destiny” during Melville’s time. Decades later, a similar conviction would play a central role in British conceptions of imperial duty that Kipling would eventually deem the “white man’s burden.” Indeed, just as his tortured psyche and self-deifying speeches help establish a paradigm that characters like Attwater and Kurtz closely echo, Ahab’s failure to find harmony with nature because he seeks to dominate it is memorably replicated in Conrad’s early fiction,
where white men like Almayer mistakenly believe they can achieve strong and lasting power over foreign environments but fall ruinously short of their goal. At the same time, Ahab’s refusal to embrace or adapt to the diverse society aboard the Pequod points forward to Stevenson and Conrad’s use of adventure fiction to explore complex questions of identity in colonial contexts during the 1890s. Melville, particularly in his portrayal of central characters like Ishmael who accept and adapt to ethnic diversity, introduced a new and unique *raison d’être* for the adventure genre. Unfortunately, both the obscurity that Melville encountered later in his career and Melville’s own choice to turn to writing poetry instead of novels may have prevented any significant adventure tradition from evolving in American fiction (the next American adventure writer would be Jack London, whose first works appeared in 1899). In England, after sensation novels dominated the 1860s and ‘70s, the bestselling adventure fiction of H. Rider Haggard reestablished the genre’s standing, as did slightly less popular but still well-received tales like *Treasure Island* (1883) and *Kidnapped* (1886) by Stevenson. But these stories, particularly Haggard’s, often revealed little or no sense of anxiety over the “white man’s burden” or suggested any significant challenges to identity that colonial spaces might present. By the 1890s, however, both Stevenson and Conrad were far more interested in exploring the question of identity in the multicultural spaces created by imperial and colonial efforts than in perpetuating imperial myths. Using the framework of adventure fiction established much earlier in the century by Marryat and others, both authors explored in astonishingly honest terms the crisis that potentially awaited Europeans who answered

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the “call” of “imperial duty”—or who simply sought adventure beyond the confines of their own society—and ventured into colonial lands.
Chapter 2
“Pretending” to Survive: Stories and the Preservation of Identity in Stevenson’s South Seas Fiction

After all, what one wants to know is not what people did, but why they did it — or rather, why they *thought* they did it; and to learn that, you should go to the men themselves. Their very falsehood is often more than another man’s truth.

RLS letter to Maud Babington

Man’s one method, whether he reasons or creates, is to half-shut his eyes against the dazzle and confusion of reality.

“A Humble Remonstrance”

With the fairy tale of suicide, of a refuge always open for him, he had hitherto beguiled and supported himself in the trials of life; and behold! that also was only a fairy tale; that also was folk-lore. [...] He had no tears, he told himself no stories. His disgust with himself was so complete, that even the process of apologetic mythology had ceased [...].

*The Ebb-Tide*

On the morning of June 28, 1888, after spending much of his adult life searching unsuccessfully for a European climate that would alleviate a serious lung ailment, Robert Louis Stevenson departed from San Francisco aboard the yacht *Casco* on what was planned to be a seven-month voyage in the South Seas. Despite the emotional strain of a serious quarrel with his friend William Henley, Stevenson could barely contain his excitement over this new adventure, writing to his friend Lady Taylor that “this is an old dream of mine which actually seems to be coming true, and I am sun-struck” (*Letters* VI: 184). With longstanding memories of gloomy Scottish and English scenes and more

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7Many believed that Stevenson was suffering from a persistent case of tuberculosis during his lifetime, so much so that he spent the winter of 1887-88 in Saranac Lake, New York, the home of the Adirondack Cottage Sanitarium of Dr. Edward Livingston Trudeau, a specialist in treating tuberculosis in the 1880s and ‘90s. However, as Jenni Calder notes in her biography of Stevenson, “modern opinion of the evidence suggests that he may have suffered from a chronic bronchial condition brought about by repeated attacks of bronchitis and pneumonia as a child” (152-53), rather than an actual case of tuberculosis.
recent ones of an especially harsh winter in upstate New York, Stevenson looked forward to experiencing the tropical climate that awaited. His voyage in the South Seas also would provide a chance to investigate the complex societies and exotic rituals that the travel writing of his friend Charles Warren Stoddard had revealed to American readers during the preceding decades. In addition, his first stop in the South Seas would be the Marquesas, a region famously depicted nearly half a century earlier in *Typee* (1846), the first novel by Herman Melville (an author whom Stevenson read voraciously as he began his voyage). But, unlike Melville’s comparatively brief stay of only four weeks among the Typees on the island of Nukuheva, Stevenson would ultimately become a permanent resident of the South Seas, which allowed him to gain a much more comprehensive picture of the complexities that dominated the region. Melville’s fiction certainly provided a compelling first taste of the South Seas for Stevenson, but it also belied the intricate matrix of political and cultural narratives that he would soon confront during this final stage of his life. Seeking to understand this multifaceted world more fully, Stevenson turned both to reading others’ nonfictional accounts and to writing his own essays about the political realities of this only partially colonized region. 8 Ultimately, though, Stevenson, one of the Victorian era’s most famous storytellers, returned to fiction to explore not only the foundational narratives of local societies but also the struggles of European beachcombers to define individual narratives that would allow them to cope with a place and an existence over which they held little, if any, control. The fiction that he created, while it certainly depicted the pessimism and uncertainty of the lives of the beachcombers he portrayed, nevertheless continued to rely on a belief in their ultimate

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8 These were collected primarily in two collections, *A Footnote to History, Eight Years of Trouble in Samoa* (1892) and *In the South Seas* (1896, published posthumously).
ability to fashion narratives that not only allowed them to survive but also to maintain control over the indigenous peoples of the region.

Even more so than many of his contemporaries, the life and career of Robert Louis Stevenson were defined and ultimately driven by stories from his and sometimes others’ vigorous imaginations. A childhood almost constantly limited to indoor activities because of fragile health generated an endless stream of stories, initially told to Stevenson primarily by his nurse and constant companion Alison “Cummy” Cunningham and by his father Thomas. Rather quickly, however, Stevenson began to create stories of his own, including an impressively sophisticated endeavor with his cousin Bob at the age of 6 during which they “invented imaginary kingdoms, called Nosingtonia and Encyclopaedia, and explored them and fought over them” (Calder 36). ⁹ Despite being born into a long line of engineers and completing a law degree (a practical compromise with a father who worried about his son’s authorial ambitions), Stevenson continued to value fantasy and the imagination as he embarked on his career as a writer. After publishing two travel books and a number of short stories and essays, Stevenson encountered his most significant popular successes with several works of “boys’ fiction”: Treasure Island (published serially in 1881-2 and as a book in 1883), The Black Arrow (1883-4; 1888), and Kidnapped (1886). ¹⁰ Writing in the wake of decades dominated by realistic fiction from authors like Dickens, Eliot, and Trollope, Stevenson produced

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⁹ Similar kingdoms were also created during childhood by the Brontë sisters as well as Thomas de Quincey and his older brother William.

¹⁰ All three were initially published serially in Young Folks; A Boys' and Girls' Paper of Instructive and Entertaining Literature.
“stories that were much closer in character to the romances of the American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne than to anything in British Victorian fiction” (Calder 116). But while this period helped Stevenson establish a level of financial security and authorial celebrity, his now thoroughly defined status as a popular writer of juvenile fiction often did not do justice to his writings, which continued to be both remarkably diverse and notoriously difficult to categorize throughout his career. Further, as Barry Menikoff has noted, even Stevenson’s earliest stories in the 1870s and ‘80s offered “a picture of life as it was actually experienced, as opposed to life understood through books” by incorporating a “strong element of realism” (8, 13).11 In the final years of his life, Stevenson blended his impulse toward investigating lived experience with his ongoing interest in the imagination as he read and wrote extensively about the region, from imaginatively retelling indigenous tales to starkly exploring how American and European beachcombers used their imaginations to generate narratives that would allow them to cope with their perpetually uncertain lives. While he revealed the distinct challenges that such men faced in the Pacific, however, he never questioned their ability to control both colonial space and its native inhabitants.

“Travellers’ Tales are Wonderful Things”: Reading (and Reassessing) the Pacific Library

Arriving in the Marquesas one month after his departure from San Francisco, Stevenson soon encountered a world that “was more complex, more layered with different levels of reality, [and] more peopled with ghosts, than anything he had ever

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11Menikoff particularly notes this realism in two of Stevenson’s stories, “The Suicide Club” and “The Rajah’s Diamond.” These stories appeared in his 1882 collection The New Arabian Nights after being previously published serially in London Magazine in 1878.
before experienced” (Calder 259). And, as he struggled to find the appropriate writing style and genre to respond to this new and very different world, his relationship with the particular “ghosts” represented by the works of Melville and Stoddard about the region (and often the very island) he was visiting evolved in important and often uneven ways. Initially, of course, Stevenson’s reading was motivated by both the pleasant and entertaining stories that captured his imagination and partly as what he considered a necessary precursor to his own writing about the Pacific. As Vanessa Smith notes, “Rather than inventing an Adamic role of first Pacific author, free to name what he saw as he pleased, [Stevenson] acknowledged the pre-existence of a Pacific library, and insisted upon reading before he wrote” (105). Indeed, Stevenson’s impulse toward reading this “Pacific library” (and his clear respect for it), while it led Fanny and others to worry that he would become lost in books and fail to give proper weight to his actual experience of the South Seas, offered important instances of both successful and unsuccessful choices in writing about the region. Even as he read extensively from others’ accounts of the South Seas, though, Stevenson had little doubt about his own ability to produce valuable (and likely even more valuable) material on the subject. Only three months into his South Seas voyage, Stevenson confidently wrote to his friend Charles Baxter, “I shall have a fine book of travels, I feel sure; and will tell you more of the South Seas after very few months than any other writer has done—except Herman Melville perhaps, who is a howling cheese”¹² (Letters VI: 207). Of course, Stevenson ended up with many months—more than six years, in fact—to create a wealth of both fiction and nonfiction on the precarious societies of the Pacific. But his initial reading.

¹²The editors of The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson, Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Meheu, explain that Stevenson often used the term “cheese” in a celebratory way.
particularly of Stoddard’s *South Sea Idyls* (1873) and Melville’s *Typee* (1846), offered crucial lessons not only about the colonial world of the Pacific over the previous half century but also about the challenges inherent in effectively and honestly portraying that world through writing.

Even more widely traveled than Stevenson, Charles Warren Stoddard made five separate visits to the South Seas during the 1860s, encountering many of the same societies that Stevenson would visit during his sojourn there almost three decades later. Stoddard also spent more than five years abroad during the 1870s as a special correspondent for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, reporting from Europe, Palestine, and Egypt. His most famous collection of travel writing, *South Sea Idyls*, was first published in 1873 and updated in 1892. At its best, *Idyls* offers a compelling picture of South Sea islanders torn irrevocably between the “civilizing” presence of Westerners and indigenous traditions and, even more compellingly, between Christian missionary efforts and the traditional paganism of many of the islands. In “Chumming with a Savage,” for instance, Stoddard describes his close friendship with Kána-Aná, a young man and native whom he later learns eventually died because, according to his mother, “he had not been sufficiently Christianized to be happy but was too Christianized to revert to happy paganism” (Gale 12). In focusing on the not-so-subtle price of Western intervention in the South Seas, Stoddard clearly echoes Melville’s early novels, especially their often unforgiving portrayals of missionaries. Conversely, a story like “Pearl-Hunting in the Pomotous” casually and unsympathetically relates how Stoddard befriends a pearl hunter named Hua Manu who ultimately dies in saving the author’s life. Beyond these lapses in sensitivity, though, Stoddard’s collection is ultimately more devoted to elaborately
describing the astonishing scenery of the Pacific, and he writes “next to nothing about theology (Catholic or native), Polynesian politics, Western commerce in the Pacific, or bellicose activities there” (Gale 14). Thus, while Stoddard’s *Idyls* likely provided an entertaining glimpse of South Seas life for Stevenson as he sailed into the Pacific, their decided lack of seriousness did not rub off on Stevenson. Indeed, less than three months after his arrival in the Marquesas, Stevenson already expressed a keen interest in the political and cultural fissures that colonialism had produced and that now defined the region: “This cruise is deeply interesting; questions of race and civilisation at every step. [. . .] In some ways, our civilisation shows in very bright colours; in others of course it looks black enough; but on the whole civilisation has it” (*Letters* VI: 213-14). Given this early interest and Stevenson’s eventual choice to reside in the region, it is no surprise that exploring the complex spectrum of colonial behavior and influence in the South Seas soon became the central mission of Stevenson’s final years.

While Stoddard became a fairly close friend of Stevenson’s during his brief time in San Francisco, his most important role in Stevenson’s life was to share with him the South Seas fiction of Herman Melville. Melville’s first three novels, especially *Typee*, were by far his most popular works, introducing the Pacific to American readers, but they also represent, in some ways, his least sophisticated work.13 They exist on the hazy line between presumably honest travel narrative and freely crafted fiction, focusing on the experiences and opinions of a narrator named Tommo whose life and beliefs closely mirror Melville’s own adventures in the Marquesas and elsewhere in the Pacific. This is

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13Melville’s reputation in the 1880s was much more circumscribed than it is today, which would explain why the well-read Stevenson did not discover Melville on his own. And this minor status was due in part to Melville’s decision to gradually abandon the exotic and adventurous hallmarks of these first three novels for more complex and philosophical fiction as his career evolved.
particularly evident in *Typee*, as Melville transforms the four weeks he spent among indigenous people on the island of Nukuheva into a three-month ordeal for Tommo. The relatively brief length of Melville’s stay in real life is especially important because of Stevenson’s sense that these places required not just attention but a substantial investment of time to understand. In the same letter in which he noted the “questions of race and civilisation” that the Pacific raised, Stevenson also sarcastically declared, “Travellers’ Tales are wonderful things, and most wonderful of all those of the globe-trotter; I have found by experience that the first week in a new place is usually passed in amassing falsehoods, in the second these begin to clear off, but the globe-trotter is already homeward bound” (*Letters* VI: 214). While it remains unclear if he had Stoddard or Melville in mind, Stevenson’s own experiences with island cultures and the colonial presence that sought to govern them would eventually lead him to make an even harsher (though still vague) judgment of the South Sea stories that preceded his. Describing his plans for *The Beach of Falesá* in September 1891, Stevenson insisted not only that his novella would represent “the first realistic South Seas story” but, more significantly, that “everybody else who has tried, that I have seen, got carried away by the romance and ended in a kind of sugar candy sham epic, and the whole effect was lost” (*Letters* VII: 161). At first blush, this seems to be a surprising assessment from an author who was widely known for his romances. In examining *Typee* more closely, though, we can begin to see how Melville’s stylized update of the American captivity narrative presented its readers with a frustratingly limited vision of the Pacific in which “romance” partially obscured the complex realities that Stevenson worked so diligently to understand.
A Prisoner’s Tale: Tommo’s Flawed Search for Truth in Typee

At the heart of why Stevenson may have viewed Typee as a less than “realistic” story of the South Seas lies Melville’s chosen narrator, Tommo. Melville, like most visitors to the island of Nukuheva during the 1840s, would likely have understood (or at least should have understood) the fact that Westerners often “allied themselves with one of the island’s three warring tribes—the Taipis, the Teis, or the Happars—and depicted the others as bloodthirsty cannibals” (Robertson-Lorant 107). Yet, in the first of three novels based on his own experience in the Pacific, Melville constructed a narrator who, while recognizing the limitations of broad stereotypes about the Taipis and other tribes, achieves little if any awareness of how much he is held captive and controlled by the Taipis’ own narratives and stereotypes of their enemies. Choosing to desert his whaler, the Dolly, and its terrifying captain with his friend Toby while it lies at anchor in Nukuheva Bay, Tommo wanders through the jungles until he encounters a tribe that he hopes are Happars but that he soon discovers are, in fact, Typees (Melville’s chosen spelling in his novel). The two are treated quite kindly by the Typees, however, and, despite the fact that they are not allowed to leave the village, Tommo in particular develops a growing respect for his captors and their way of life. Eventually, though, his discovery of evidence of the Typees’ cannibalism and his intense fear that he will be tattooed against his will drive him to escape aboard an Australian ship, the Julia.\textsuperscript{14} Along the way, Tommo delivers several harsh criticisms of “civilization” and admiring celebrations of “noble savages” that clearly echo Jean-Jacques Rousseau. But Tommo, even with the potential for hindsight, offers an account that, while making fairly plain

\begin{footnote}
\textsuperscript{14}Omoo (1847), the sequel to Typee, begins with Tommo aboard the Julia, which turns out to be as poorly captained as the Dolly, the original ship that Tommo deserted on Nukuheva in Typee.
\end{footnote}
how the Typees use narratives to manipulate his behavior and attitudes, also demonstrates Tommo’s inability to recognize that he might have been little more than a pawn in the complex struggle among the island’s tribes and against colonizers like the French.

Tommo seeks to tell his readers a captivating tale, but what he ultimately relates is the story of a captive of tales, a naïve young man whose own story is actually an uneven and malleable mélange of other stories.

Before he even sets foot on the island of Nukuheva, Tommo has already encountered seemingly all there is to know about the Typees, both from his own shipmates and rival tribesmen on the island itself. While adoringly describing the landscape of Nukuheva, Tommo contrasts “the lovely valley of Happar, whose inmates cherish the most friendly relations with the inhabitants of Nukuheva” to “the magnificent valley of the dreaded Typees, the unappeasable enemies of both these tribes” (24). The Happars, in other words, have successfully allied with the Teiis (the third of the island’s tribes) and enjoy a relatively benign relationship with westerners as well. The Typees, secluded in their own valley, have no means of contradicting their reputation as “lover[s] of human flesh” (24). Though Tommo expresses mild surprise that this epithet is applied exclusively to the Typees, since their rivals are likely also cannibals (despite their protestations), he remains convinced that the Typees must have acted with “peculiar ferocity” in order to merit this “special stigma” (25). This willingness to accept the picture of Typees as violent and dangerous is further bolstered by sailor’s tales that he has heard. The first tells of the captain of the Katherine who, after being captured by the Typees, “was only saved from a cruel death by the intervention of a young girl, who

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15This and subsequent quotations from Typee will refer to Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2003).
facilitated his escape” (25). The second and much more troubling account describes an English vessel that was lured to shore by “the perfidious Typees” who then “flocked aboard the doomed vessel by hundreds, and at a given signal murdered every soul on board” (25). Though Tommo’s intent here is to portray his ready belief in the Typees’ violent behavior before his arrival on Nukuheva, his narration quickly shifts into an angry defense of the Typees as victimized people whose willingness to fight back has fed the negative stereotypes he once believed. While this is an admirable attempt to counterbalance seemingly unsubstantiated claims of mass murder, Tommo’s message occasionally veers into oversimplification. Forgetting the complex realities of Nukuheva, where three distinct tribes have chosen different paths in responding to colonial incursions, Tommo transforms every arrival of “the ‘big canoe’ of the European” in the Pacific into an event that automatically foreshadows “a series of cold-blooded robberies, kidnappings, and murders, the iniquity of which might be considered almost sufficient to sink her guilty timbers to the bottom of the sea” (27). Especially to Stevenson, who spent years and copious amounts of ink seeking to fully understand the complicated politics of colonialism in the South Seas, Tommo’s inability to find a nuanced position between the poles of “Typees are murderers” and “Europeans are murderers” would have seemed largely counterproductive.

Prepared to loathe and even fear the Typees among whom he soon finds himself via the stories he has been told, Tommo is initially dumbfounded by the kind welcome he and Toby receive. Worrying that this initial reception may not last long, Tommo wonders, “But what dependence could be placed upon the fickle passions which sway the bosom of a savage? His inconstancy and treachery are proverbial” (76). Still reliant on
the “proverbial” stories of colonialists and rivals, Tommo is reluctant to believe that he and Toby will remain such welcome guests. A short time later, after he has befriended a number of the Typees, Tommo abandons these tales and announces that “the horrible character imputed to these Typees appeared to me wholly undeserved” (97). Reminded by Toby that they are cannibals, Tommo insists that “a more humane, gentlemanly, and amiable set of epicures do not probably exist in the Pacific” (97). Of course, Tommo’s willingness to believe in the benign existence that the Typees have thus far presented is not all that surprising, given the gratitude that he would almost naturally feel toward his new “friends.” But it soon becomes clear that Tommo makes such a judgment based on the highly selective view of Typee life that he is allowed. After Toby is attacked by Happars while attempting to procure medical supplies, as Tommo relates, the Typees relentlessly exhort their captives to be content, “contrasting their own generous reception of us with the animosity of their neighbors” while disregarding the extent to which Toby’s association with the Typees caused the attack (102). Pressing the issue and playing even further upon the fears of Tommo and Toby, the Typees “dwelt upon the cannibal propensities of the Happars, a subject which they were perfectly aware could not fail to alarm us; while at the same time they earnestly disclaimed all participation in so horrid a custom” (102). Though Tommo does not reveal, even in retrospect, why the Typees were so intent on keeping him among them, their overly earnest efforts here to manipulate their captives, especially their false denial of cannibalism, exposes the lengths to which they are willing to go. Tommo’s willingness to believe this most recent story leads to an astonishing and lengthy celebration of Typean culture—a celebration
tarnished only by the distinct sense that it represents the coerced thoughts of a prisoner rather than a willing visitor.

Were it not for a few moments of honesty that establish the harrowing context in which Tommo comes to enthusiastically embrace the valley of the Typees, the seventeenth chapter of Typee would represent its most sustained criticism of western civilization as well as offering stunning proof of the apparently benign and happy existence of the Typees. Describing how, “if ever disagreeable thoughts arose in my mind, I drove them away” (124), Tommo explains the conditions that allow for his increasingly positive opinion of his captors:

In the altered frame of mind to which I have referred, every object that presented itself to my notice in the valley struck me in a new light, and the opportunities I now enjoyed of observing the manners of its inmates, tended to strengthen my favorable impressions. (126)

By his own admission, Tommo acknowledges that, if held against his will and denied solitude or free travel on the island, yet otherwise treated as if he were a visiting dignitary and a valued guest, he is readily willing to believe that the Typees are superior to the society that he has deliberately fled. Seemingly “carried away by the romance” (in Stevenson’s words) of the straightforward and apparently worry-free existence of the Typees, Tommo soon launches into a diatribe that attributes virtually every evil in the world to civilization and especially to its inescapable attachment to money. To Tommo’s partially blinded eyes, Typee life appears devoid of any type of strife or disease, so simple indeed that he later calls it “little else than an often interrupted and luxurious nap” (152). Such an argument likely would have been well received by Stevenson, whose writings and a number of speeches from his final years take up a similar theme. As Tommo narrates a brief battle between the Typees and the Happars, however, the extent
to which his understanding of Typee life is carefully limited and relentlessly controlled by his hosts/captors becomes devastatingly clear.

Woken from a nap one afternoon, Tommo hears a great commotion and realizes that a battle with the Happars has begun. But while every able-bodied Typee male heads into the valley, Tommo must remain behind with only Kory-Kory and a number of aged men. Unable to surmise much from the infrequent noises of battle, Tommo is instead treated to “a variety of pantomimic illustrations” by Kory-Kory, who “sought most zealously to impress me with a due sense of [the battle’s] importance” (129). The Typees return a short time later bearing only a few battle scars. Assured by what he sees and by what Kory-Kory continues to ecstatically proclaim, Tommo believes their version and also makes several presumptions:

What the enemy had suffered I could not discover, but I presume they had succeeded in taking off with them the bodies of the slain. [ . . . ] I reasonably concluded that the wars of the natives were marked by no very sanguinary traits. [ . . . ] Why had [they] not made a descent into the hostile vale, and brought away some trophy of his victory—some materials for the cannibal entertainment which I had heard usually terminated every engagement? After all, I was much inclined to believe that such shocking festivals must occur very rarely among the islanders, if, indeed, they ever took place. (130)

Believing not only that the Typees have triumphed but that they must have killed Happars in the process, Tommo also eagerly assumes that this limited skirmish is representative of every other confrontation between the two tribes. But what is most clear here, and an aspect of Tommo’s thoughts that would have particularly piqued Stevenson’s attention, is Tommo’s implicit claim that the stories he heard before his arrival among the Typees were grossly inaccurate. But Tommo’s reaction against the specious tales that he so
readily imbibed before his desertion represents an equally naïve acceptance of Typean stories that might be equally dubious.

In a process evocative of Stevenson’s own reassessment of the Pacific library, Tommo revisits and angrily rejects the stories generated about Pacific cultures that he once implicitly believed. As he does so, he offers a harsh and ironic judgment of the majority of whites in the region, including the missionaries and travelers who generate such accounts as well as the “retired old South-Sea rovers” upon whom many of the stories depend (170). Increasingly convinced of the peaceful nature of Typean culture, Tommo notes how it completely contradicts “the horrible descriptions of Polynesian worship which we have received [. . .] in those accounts of the evangelized islands with which the missionaries have favored us” (169). Continuing his criticism, he sarcastically notes,

Did not the sacred character of these persons render the purity of their intentions unquestionable, I should certainly be led to suppose that they had exaggerated the evils of Paganism, in order to enhance the merit of their own disinterested labors. (169)

Recognizing seemingly for the first time that authors have their own agendas, Tommo is particularly shocked by what he sees as deliberate inaccuracies in these accounts. But while he has fairly harsh words for these missionaries, Tommo does not ultimately blame them for the false claims in their writing, choosing instead to condemn the “rovers” and beachcombers who serve as the missionaries’ main sources of information—and whom the missionaries are more than willing to trust. Anticipating Stevenson, Tommo laments that the information that supports these accounts “is given by a man who, according to his own statement, was only at one of the islands and remained there but two weeks, sleeping every night on board his ship, and taking little kid-glove excursions ashore in the day”
More than being simply uninformed, though, Tommo further blames such “rovers” for allowing personal vanity to spur each of them to share “not only all he knows but a good deal more” (170). And, unlike Tommo, these rovers clearly recognize the desires and agendas of their audience, for each “knows just the sort of information wanted, and furnishes it to any extent” (170). This passage would have been, in 1846, an important revelation of the self-fulfilling nature of travel and missionary writing about the South Seas. But Tommo’s reaction to it—a total rejection of western accounts of Pacific culture—points to perhaps his largest failing as a narrator: his inability to find a middle ground that recognizes the worth and the limitations of both western and native narratives.

Tommo’s inability to balance between the widely divergent perspectives he encounters about the Typees occurs despite his own recognition of the complicated nature of “Truth.” Noting that some in the west consider any account of cannibalism in the Pacific as offering the most extravagant fiction and place it “on the same shelf with Blue Beard and Jack the Giant-Killer,” while others eagerly accept the claims of such narratives, Tommo matter-of-factly explains, “But here, Truth, who loves to be centrally located, is again found between the two extremes” (205). While the question of cannibalism’s practice in the region remains under debate even now, Tommo’s assertion is likely correct, as he describes the existence of cannibalism but only on rare occurrences among certain Pacific tribes. In his best moments, then, Tommo (and Melville behind him) is capable of offering a remarkably evenhanded picture of the Pacific life he describes. But those moments remain few and far between in Melville’s first novel, with

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16 Given Stevenson’s reading of Melville on his voyage to the South Seas, the fact that he identifies the same length of time, two weeks, as a necessary period of “amassing falsehoods” before one can discover the real truth of a place, seems more than coincidental.
its narrator bouncing between extremes in a largely fruitless quest to understand the
Typees. Later in his career, of course, Melville’s fiction would become much more
complex and nuanced in seeking an honest portrayal of multicultural environments like
the Pequod in Moby-Dick. But Stevenson, especially by the time he began his first
novella on the South Seas in 1891, had already determined that he would create fiction
that would mirror the actual existence that he saw during his travels and residence there.
In doing so, as Vanessa Smith explains, Stevenson demonstrated “the way in which
writing about the Pacific must negotiate between local and external perspectives, neither
of which [was] finally authoritative or authentic” (144).

**Much More Than “Child’s Play”: Stevenson’s Theories of Storytelling**

In 1881, as part of the essay collection *Virginibus Puerisque*, Stevenson published
a charming and incisive piece called “Child’s Play” that ostensibly sought to elucidate the
differences between the simple stories and “play” of children and the more sophisticated
and deeper perceptive abilities of adults. In addition to his own extensive storytelling
experience as a child, Stevenson had also become the stepfather of Fanny’s 12-year-old
son Lloyd upon their marriage a year earlier. And for anyone who has spent time around
children, his explanation of their ability to turn the most mundane of objects into a
spectacular talisman and their indefatigable commitment to such play would certainly
ring true. In addition, though, while written a decade before his first attempt to produce
fiction that would honestly portray the challenges of the South Seas to European identity,
“Child’s Play” is also a document that, while seeking to draw a stark contrast between
children’s and adults’ use of stories, also reveals just how comparable (and sometimes
interdependent) these processes can be. In this way, it is an important revelation of Stevenson’s understanding of the many intricacies of telling stories at any age. Even more remarkably, though, Stevenson’s meditation on the act of storytelling offers a crucial prism through which we can view Stevenson’s novellas of the South Seas, *The Beach of Falesá* and *The Ebb-Tide*.\(^\text{17}\) For at the center of these two works stand two individuals, Case and Attwater, who prove themselves most successful at manipulating their environments and their peers primarily through their brutal replication of the essential features of “child’s play” as described by Stevenson in 1881. Though they possess a sober understanding of the deadly stakes of the predicaments they face, both also display an absolute adaptability that amplifies their ability to suspend reality and to “make abstraction of whatever does not fit” into the state of affairs that they seek to preserve (“Child’s Play” 131). Before we turn to these novellas, though, I want to explore Stevenson’s essay more fully, especially its extensive description of childhood storytelling.

Though the majority of his essay explores the nature of play among children, Stevenson begins by explaining the purpose of such play through a decidedly mundane example: eating mutton at dinner. Neither children nor adults find such food especially appetizing by itself, but their remedy for such blandness takes a very different shape. For adults, “cold mutton is cold mutton all the world over” and can only be improved by adding pickles to the meal; children, conversely, need no additional flavors but rather possess both an ability and a commitment to storytelling that fulfills their need: “But for

\(^\text{17}\) The presence of such play in adventure fiction is nothing new, as Stevenson readily observes. Indeed, the ability to adapt via such “play” was present even in arguably the first adventure novel, *Robinson Crusoe*: “Crusoe was always at makeshifts and had, in so many words, to *play* at a great variety of professions” (132).
the child it is still possible to weave an enchantment over eatables; and if he has but read of a dish in a story-book, it will be heavenly manna to him for a week” (127). Why do adults possess a nostalgia and regret “for our childhood [that] is not wholly justifiable” (127)? Because imagination sparked by even the smallest “story-book” can give a child the power to turn “mutton” into “manna” using nothing but that imagination. Such seeming miracles are achievable through the essential process of abstraction, one that Stevenson imagines can be so overwhelming that children might even forget that they are eating at all. Having established the power of child’s play, Stevenson begins a thorough investigation of the complex nature of such play, especially its reliance on abstraction. In doing so, he uncovers both encouraging and sometimes troubling details that, while pardonable in children, develop into deeply disturbing traits in Stevenson’s portrayals of Case and Attwater.

As is evidenced by Stevenson’s mutton example, one core aspect of child’s play is its ability to make abstraction of any object in order to suit its needs. Looking back on his childhood, Stevenson explains how his sense of larger ideas like beauty remained decidedly general, and, thus, the specific objects around him “were not beautiful in themselves, but merely interesting or enviable to me as I thought they might be turned to practical account in play” (128). This narrow agenda and severely circumscribed means of judgment remains inferior to the discerning tastes and extensive palates of adults, but it suits the child’s world as Stevenson imagines it, a world in which the devotion to play can subsume all other considerations. “In the child’s world of dim sensation, play is all in all,” Stevenson insists later in the essay. “‘Making believe’ is the gist of his whole life,

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18 This and subsequent quotations from “Child’s Play” will refer to *Virginibus Puerisque & Other Papers* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1946).
and he cannot so much as take a walk except in character” (134). But while the flexibility to abstract the meaning of any object leads to successful play, its close corollary—the possibility that objects come to be valued only to the extent that they “might be turned to practical account”—can lead to a larger and potentially more disquieting disregard of other human beings (though again, such behavior in a child is not in and of itself objectionable or even abnormal). Explaining how “[t]wo children playing at soldiers are far more interesting to each other” than an actual soldier, Stevenson maintains, “Upon us [adults], who are further advanced and fairly dealing with the threads of destiny, they only glance from time to time to glean a hint for their own mimetic reproduction” (133).

The idea of children largely ignoring adults, especially in the midst of play, hardly represents a revelation. However, Stevenson does dwell on the insensitivity that may be sparked by such an intense interest in “art for art’s sake,” highlighting the disconnect between children’s interest in the actions involved with play and the emotional repercussions of such events in real life.

‘Art for art’ is their motto; and the doings of grown folk are only interesting as the raw material for play. Not Théophile Gautier, not Flaubert, can look more callously upon life, or rate the reproduction more highly over the reality; and they will parody an execution, a deathbed, or the funeral of the young man of Nain, with all the cheerfulness in the world. (133)

Unable to grasp the monumental significance of the death scenes that they eagerly reproduce, children “are even content to forego what we call the realities, and prefer the shadow to the substance” (134). They do so in this instance from a position of ignorance, armed only with a sense of the visual appearance of such scenes; thus, these children merely recognize and imitate the “shadow” without being able to grasp the “substance.” But if this represents the callousness that child’s play can produce, Stevenson suggests
elsewhere in the essay that such an incomplete understanding of “reality” can also shield children from the complicated and potentially disturbing world of adults.

Though “Child’s Play” begins with Stevenson’s insistence that the nostalgia we feel for childhood is largely unjustified, his description of the world of childhood as a veritable cocoon where confusion is easily ignored clearly suggests his partial envy of such a state. In the midst of his explanation of children’s virtually unlimited ability to make abstractions of the objects around them, Stevenson contends, “Nothing can stagger a child’s faith; he accepts the clumsiest substitutes and can swallow the most staring incongruities. […] He can make abstraction of whatever does not fit into his fable” (131). Confronted with nonsense or seeming absurdity, a child finds a way forward, incorporating such “incongruities” into play and demonstrating how the nature of play is not merely to prefer but to deliberately choose fiction over reality (or “shadow” over “substance”). Explaining that we cannot and should not expect children to grasp “what we mean by abstract truthfulness,” Stevenson makes this inclination quite clear:

They walk in a vain show, and among mists and rainbows; they are passionate after dreams and unconcerned about realities; […] You do not consider how little the child sees, or how swift he is to weave what he has seen into bewildering fiction; and that he cares no more for what you call truth, than you for a gingerbread dragoon. (137-38)

Children “are able enough to see, but they have no great faculty for looking,” and thus they simply miss many important details of the complex events that often surround them (128). And what little they do see and comprehend sufficiently to be troubled, they quickly incorporate into their play-filled lives. Partly through ignorance and partly by instinct, children preserve a world that makes little sense to their parents but more than
enough sense to themselves. And they do so via a constant commitment to often elaborate play and the stories that keep it alive.

Conversely, as Stevenson explains when he contrasts adulthood with childhood, adults have evolved a keener ability to perceive their world and, rather than making up random stories, instead develop “theories” about life that allow them to make sense of events. While they have lost some of the simple joys inherent in child’s play, most adults retain an earnest sense of curiosity: “they know more than when they were children, they understand better, their desires and sympathies answer more nimbly to the provocation of the senses, and their minds are brimming with interest as they go about the world” (129). While no longer interested in arbitrary reproductions of life, however, adults still seek to integrate what they observe in a manner similar to children, though with a greater sophistication with which such events help to produce certain “theories about life” that come to systematically define their worldview. As we grow into adulthood, Stevenson explains,

all things are transformed and seen through theories and associations as through coloured windows. We make to ourselves day by day, out of history, and gossip, and economical speculations, and God knows what, a medium in which we walk and through which we look abroad. We study shop windows with other eyes than in our childhood, never to wonder, not always to admire, but to make and modify our little incongruous theories about life. (129)

Released from the need to incorporate objects into their stories, adults turn their attention to the words that they read and the domestic scenes they observe as they develop stories not to mimic such realities but to help explain and situate them within their broader understanding of life. At the same time, most adults never fully escape the world of play; given the “pedestrian fancy that the child exhibits,” it is adults “who make the nursery
stories” (132). Thus, while adults have a very different relationship with storytelling than children, it clearly remains a significant part of their lives. In addition, while adults’ theories take into account more of the realities of life, they can also still mirror children’s stories by oversimplifying life and ignoring or disregarding complexities beyond an adult’s comprehension. As Stevenson argues in an 1884 essay entitled “A Humble Remonstrance,” “Man’s one method, whether he reasons or creates, is to half-shut his eyes against the dazzle and confusion of reality” (Calder 209-10).

While “Child’s Play” provides a fascinating glimpse into Stevenson’s beliefs about storytelling early in his career, its final paragraph makes clear its author’s more immediate objective: an appeal for parents to preserve these years of unadulterated play.

> It would be easy to leave them in their native cloudland, where they figure so prettily—pretty like flowers and innocent like dogs. They will come out of their gardens soon enough, and have to go into offices and the witness-box. Spare them yet a while, O conscientious parent! (139)

Stevenson, himself forced by his father to obtain a law degree, urges the protection of child’s play not only because of its picturesque nature but also, and more importantly, because of its inevitable end. Yet what I want to explore in the remainder of this chapter is whether individuals ever truly leave their “gardens”—and, even if they do, whether they can return to or re-create them as needed. In other words, in the context of Stevenson’s novellas of the South Seas, written more than a decade after the publication of “Child’s Play,” these are the questions I want to answer: Do men like Case, Herrick, Davis, and Attwater ever fully leave their “gardens”? Or do they choose to “revisit” them when faced with the often bewildering realities of life in the Pacific? And is their choice to construct stories with which to justify their existence a natural, unconscious impulse or
a deliberate attempt to renew the feelings of comfort, safety, and freedom that childhood creates?

While the lion’s share of Stevenson criticism has traditionally focused on his better-known works of the 1880s, particularly Treasure Island, Kidnapped, and the frequently taught The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, the past few years have shown a surprising amount of criticism focused on Stevenson’s final works. In 2007 alone, two publications have joined the ongoing debate about Stevenson’s allegiances to romance and realism during his diverse career. Oliver Buckton’s Cruising with Robert Louis Stevenson: Travel, Narrative, and the Colonial Body argues that Stevenson’s use of the human body to express his resistance to realism and that his observation of the vitality and simultaneous fragility he sees in native bodies drives his critiques of imperialism. John Kucich also devotes a chapter of Imperial Masochism: British Fiction, Fantasy and Social Class to a consideration of the relationship between the politics of imperialism and social class in Stevenson’s works. In particular, Kucich focuses on the exaggeration of autonomy (seen particularly in The Ebb-Tide’s Attwater) as a compensatory fantasy. Just as critics like Barry Menikoff have helpfully noted that Stevenson’s early works, which were noted for their romantic qualities, contained a substantial amount of realism, Buckton and Kucich are now similarly exposing romantic strains in the unflinching realism of Stevenson’s final works. And they are doing so as other critics re-examine Stevenson’s theories of reading and storytelling, particularly in Glenda Norquay’s Robert Louis Stevenson and Theories of Reading (2007). In addition to these critical approaches, a number of critics have explored Stevenson’s complex relationships with South Seas
missionaries in real life and his equally complicated portrayals of them in his fiction. Chief among these is Ann Colley’s *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Colonial Imagination* (2004), which demonstrates Stevenson’s sympathy with some missionaries, especially those who showed themselves to be careful and respectful ethnographers (indeed, Stevenson seemed more interested in their ethnography than in their abilities as missionaries). And Roger Ebbatson’s 2005 essay “Stevenson’s *The Ebb-Tide*: Missionary Endeavour in the Islands of Light” reveals the use and misuse of religion and scripture not only by Attwater but also by his white adversaries in *The Ebb-Tide*. The picture that emerges from these various studies is that Stevenson did not become a wholly new person when he decided to settle in the South Seas. Rather, the author who both valued and worried about the imagination continued to explore its importance, but he did so in a new cultural and social context.

“Tell Him the Place is a Blooming Toyshop!”: Case, Conjuring Tricks, and the Manipulation of Space in *The Beach of Falesá*

As Barry Menikoff makes clear in his “Introduction” to the authoritative 1987 edition, Stevenson’s 1893 novella *The Beach of Falesá* remains a remarkable achievement. Essentially the story of Wiltshire, a dissolute white man who is stationed on the island of Falesá and who also narrates the tale from his distinctive and sometimes bigoted point of view, it exposes the unsettling realities at the heart of colonial trade in the Pacific. Yet, while Stevenson’s novella is ostensibly told from a white perspective, Menikoff identifies the significant focus on nonwhite points of view that makes Wiltshire’s narrative unique: “As an outsider in a strange land, a man ‘tabooed’ by association, [Wiltshire] is forced to see himself as others see him, and in the process to
see others differently, perhaps to see them as they are” (16). In addition, the text reveals Wiltshire’s pointed ignorance of local customs and his narrative’s dependence on a large collection of nonwhite interpreters and interpolated tales. Stevenson’s intention to make The Beach of Falesá something more than just another story about white men in the Pacific is also clear in two specific choices. The first was to initially publish the story with the title of “Uma,” the name of Wiltshire’s “kanaka” wife who plays an important role in the plot. Stevenson’s narrative also offers significant depth in its portrayals of both Uma and a local chief named Maea, often undercutting Wiltshire’s stereotypes even as he continues to espouse them. Uma grows from the rough equivalent of a mail-order bride when she first appears to possessing the courage to brave the bedeviled forest of Case, Wiltshire’s white adversary on Falesá, shortly before the story’s climax. In addition, her superstitious tales of supernatural events on the island, while belittled by Wiltshire, “acquire a potency that remains undiminished at the end of Wiltshire’s narrative,” as Vanessa Smith explains. “Her fantastic tales are incorporated directly into Wiltshire’s narrative, rather than quoted as Uma’s speech, implying his internalisation of a mode of belief which he explicitly rejects” (177). Maea, the chief of a local tribe who has set a “taboo” on Uma that also transfers to Wiltshire upon their marriage, initially seems to be an unquestioning vassal to Case’s will. Late in the story, however, Maea

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19 This and subsequent quotations from Menikoff’s introduction and the text of the story will refer to The Beach at Falesá (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1987).

20 According to Menikoff’s notes to The Beach of Falesá, “kanaka” was a “Hawaiian term for man; also used pejoratively to signify a native” (via A Dictionary of the Hawaiian Language (Honolulu, 1865)) (103n). Despite its pejorative status, “kanaka” is a fully regularized term for any nonwhites in both Falesá and The Ebb-Tide.

21 The story was first published in six installments as Uma in the Illustrated London News between July 2 and August 6, 1892. It later appeared in book form as The Beach of Falesá along with two other stories, The Bottle Imp and The Isle of Voices, in Island Nights’ Entertainments (April 1893) (Menikoff 14).
abandons his association with Case and pledges to trade all of his copra with Wiltshire (even against his own tribe’s will). Pleasantly surprised by this act, Wiltshire suddenly realizes that Maea may have been playing his own game all along. Speculating that Maea may have honored the taboo for political reasons, Wiltshire offers this pronouncement: “One thing I made out: he could never really have thought much harm of Uma; he could never have been really frightened, and must just have made believe from dodginess and because he thought Case had a strong pull in the village and could help him on” (84).

Thus, Wiltshire’s narrative is far from incapable of presenting islanders who show a substantial amount of complexity and self-interest. But even figures like Uma and Maea, especially prior to the arrival of Wiltshire, operate in a universe largely defined and sharply delimited by the desires and prerogatives of Case.

Despite Stevenson’s intentions and his novella’s positive portrayals of islanders, it is difficult to deny that Stevenson’s novella still stands primarily as a tale of the rivalry and ultimately fatal battle between two white men. For, while much of Stevenson’s nonfictional writings about the South Seas focused on local cultures that were threatened by the colonial presence, his two most substantial fictional responses to the region are dominated by the plight of white men stranded half a world from home. As Menikoff explains, “Stevenson was intrigued by the whites he met in the Pacific; he wondered how they managed to stay in such alien surroundings” (16). Stevenson’s first novella of the South Seas, what he considered the “first realistic South Sea story” (*Letters* VII: 161), begins and ends (literally and figuratively) with a consideration of Wiltshire’s tenuous existence in the Pacific, from his fascinated ignorance upon arriving at Falesá to his
closing discomfiture with his status as husband to an island girl and father to half-caste girls.

_The Beach of Falesá_ begins as Wiltshire arrives on the island after spending several years on “a low island near the line, living for the most part solitary among the natives” (27). Shortly after leaving the ship, Wiltshire is greeted by Case, a white man who instantly befriends him and soon helps him to find a wife from among the island girls. Case even draws up a bogus marriage contract and performs the “wedding” of Wiltshire and Uma. Why Case is so anxious to do this becomes clear the next morning, as the local villagers come to stare at the white man and his new wife. Eventually, Wiltshire discovers that Uma has been tabooed by the local chief, and her taboo also transfers to her new husband, ending the brief friendship between Wiltshire and Case. Having opened a shop that is visited by no customers due to the taboo, Wiltshire soon finds hope when he befriends a missionary named Tarleton, who reveals Case’s clever manipulations of the local people for his own economic benefit. An emboldened Wiltshire soon enters the forest that Case controls, discovering that the devilish temple within it is actually made up of an ancient stone structure with painted masks mounted on it. Leaving the forest, Wiltshire meets Case and realizes that he must destroy this structure in order to survive on the island. After Wiltshire managed to destroy it, he and Case fight in the dark, with Wiltshire eventually stabbing his adversary to death. In the end, Wiltshire and Uma have several children together, though Wiltshire closes his tale by wondering how he will be able to find suitable (i.e., white) husbands for his little girls.
At the heart of any consideration of place in *The Beach of Falesá* lies the reality that Falesá is relentlessly and ruthlessly manipulated and controlled by Case. His role in the deaths of a number of white rivals who preceded Wiltshire is made fairly clear via what Wiltshire hears aboard the ship that will deliver him to Falesá and later confirmed by the missionary Tarleton. In addition, as becomes clear late in the story, Case has successfully gained control over the island’s copra through a series of political threats and “conjuring trick[s]” that effectively prey upon local beliefs. Forced to adapt to the presence of Wiltshire, however, Case’s initial choice is to befriend and to forge what we soon realize to be a false yet quite convincing solidarity with Wiltshire, one based upon their common beliefs in their own superiority to the “kanakas”—the solidarity, that is, of “White Men.” And Case’s charms achieve their desired effect, at least initially. As Wiltshire so honestly admits, during his first day on the island, “Case used me like a gentleman and like a friend, made me welcome to Falesá, and put his services at my disposal” (29). Already feeling “sick for white neighbours” when he arrives on the island (29), Wiltshire offers an easy target, and his new “friend” swiftly delivers him a seemingly hand-picked kanaka wife. While pretending to survey a large group of young women from the island, Case makes sure that Wiltshire’s eyes focus on Uma, a woman whom Case knows to be tabooed. Thus, while satisfying his new “friend’s” desire for female companionship, Case virtually guarantees the continuation of his monopoly of the island’s copra. The next day, stymied and troubled by how the locals gather near his house and stare at him rather than becoming his customers, Wiltshire seeks an

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Wiltshire never offers an explanation for why he has lived for four years “on a low island near the line, living for the most part solitary among natives” prior to his newest assignment (27), and, since he is the only narrator of the tale, we receive no other account of Wiltshire’s life previous to coming to Falesá, including what led him to the South Seas in the first place.
explanation from Case, his only “friend” on the island. Case’s response is to make the game he is playing—pretending that the “white man’s burden” and its central tenet that whites possess a special status in colonized spaces hold true on Falesá—even more evident:

I don’t know where the impudence of these kanakas’l’ll go next, they seem to have lost all idea of respect for whites. [. . .] It’s the worst thing of the kind I’ve heard of yet. But I’ll stand by you [. . . .] Understand me, Wiltshire, I don’t count this your quarrel [. . .] I count it all of our quarrel, I count it the White Man’s Quarrel, and I’ll stand to it through thick and thin, and there’s my hand on it. (47-48)

Once again, Case’s manipulations take immediate hold of Wiltshire, spurring him to respond with an almost boilerplate version of the jingoistic case for imperialism: “You tell them who I am. I’m a white man, and a British Subject, and no end of a big chief at home; and I’ve come here to do them good and bring them civilisation” (49). Case tries and predictably fails to convince the chief to lift Wiltshire’s taboo, which leads to an angry and violent schism between the two white men of Falesá. This leaves Wiltshire’s livelihood on the island severely threatened and uncertain, at least until the surprising alliance with the missionary Tarleton in the next chapter. Yet, what is most important about Case’s efforts to eliminate Wiltshire as a rival through this bogus camaraderie is their grounding in a sense of play and imagination through which Case seeks to assure Wiltshire that what he wants to believe about his duty and his status as a “White Man” is, in fact, the reality on Falesá. Less like Stevenson’s children at play, Case plays the role of the originator of stories that children then preserve through play. But Wiltshire is certainly not the first victim of Case’s substantial skills at playing into false expectations, as his control of and influence over local politics and trade soon make manifest.
Much like Hank Morgan in Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (first published in 1889), Case gains control over an unfamiliar space by using western technology to exploit the beliefs of those he seeks to dominate. In his situation, though, such tools are among the most rudimentary that he could ever employ—a crude bit of sleight of hand and makeshift masks suitable for a children’s puppet show. Seeking to counteract the influence of Namu, a priest with close ties to Case, Tarleton preaches to the tribe about “distinguishing the true spiritual power” and the false ones. Determined to discredit Tarleton’s effort, Case approaches him in the middle of the village and performs his trick. “And making a snatch at my head, he made believe to pluck out a dollar, and held it in the air,” Tarleton explains (68). Noting the crowd’s awed response, Tarleton bitterly complains, “As for myself, I stood amazed. The thing was a common, conjuring trick, which I have seen performed at home a score of times” (68). Rather than try to physically harm Tarleton, Case chooses instead to play upon the naivete of the villagers to great success. More than simply disappointed with his marginalization, Tarleton points to how this almost absurdly simple act on Case’s part demonstrates the dangers that both he and Wiltshire now face. After Wiltshire admits of the episode, “I must say it was well played,” Tarleton makes the stakes of the enmity quite clear: “[t]here is no question but he has now made up his mind to rid himself of you. How he means to try, we have no guess; only be sure it’s something new. There is no end to his readiness and invention” (68). Case, then, is a master storyteller who easily manipulates the natives of Falesá and, in doing so, marginalizes and sometimes eliminates his white rivals. At the same time, though, much like Attwater in *The Ebb-Tide* and the storytelling children of Stevenson’s early essay, Case demonstrates a nearly absolute adaptability, a capacity for “invention”
that allows him to maintain tight control over the island. And more than simply controlling the inhabitants of the island, it soon becomes clear that Case has direct and unquestioned dominion over a substantial part of the island’s landscape, especially the forest where he performs his “devil-work.”

Beyond his extensive control over the human elements of Falesá, Case also appears both to be in harmony with nature and also to be quite capable of making nature (especially the forest) seem more foreboding through the clever use of simple objects. During a conversation with a local that reveals Case’s dominion over the forest and his rumored association with “Tiapolo” (the “big-chief devil,” according to that local), Wiltshire relates Case’s emergence from that forest in a moment packed with visual power:

I was looking in front of me across the bay, and I saw the hanging front of the woods pushed suddenly open, and Case with a gun in his hand step forth into the sunshine on the black beach. He was got up in light pyjamas, near white, his gun sparkled, he looked mighty conspicuous; and the land crabs scuttled from all round him to their holes. (72-73)

Emerging from the dense forest, Case stands out in sharp detail, dressed in bright white clothing yet brandishing a “sparkling” black gun while standing on a “black beach.” Beyond this stark visual contrast, though, nature itself seems to respond to Case in ways that suggest an awed respect. For, in addition to the crabs that “scuttle” away from Case’s forceful arrival, Case is soon accompanied by other creatures as well, as Wiltshire notes: “He was in deep thought; and the birds seemed to know it, trotting quite near him on the sand or wheeling and calling in his ears” (73). Even without an awareness of Case’s impressive ingenuity via his “conjuring trick,” his dominant and imposing presence in this brief glimpse, showing him both in control of and in harmony with nature, would still
trouble Wiltshire as well as the native islanders. As he continues his conversation with his friend, however, Wiltshire soon learns of the mysterious building at the heart of Case’s dominion, a structure rumored to contain a devil but whose primary use—whether prison or sanctuary—remains in dispute. Recovering from Case’s dazzling appearance moments earlier, Wiltshire instantly suspects more “conjuring” behind this “temple,” explaining, “I began to have a glimmer of the man’s position, and the means by which he had acquired it, and though I saw he was a tough nut to crack, I was noways cast down” (74). Determined to investigate its nature, Wiltshire soon enters Case’s forest and discovers the impressive and astonishing child’s play that lies at the heart of Case’s “devilish” schemes.

Despite his strong suspicions that Case’s power derives from decidedly mundane means, Wiltshire discovers that he is, at least briefly, as susceptible to Case’s manipulations as the kanakas. But this momentary sense of common humanity and equality before fear quickly evaporates when Wiltshire discovers that what generates such fear and superstition amounts to nothing more than a collection of children’s playthings. Entering the darkness of the forest in the midst of day, Wiltshire speaks of doubt and fear as being “natural” byproducts of this place while also affirming, “It’s my belief a superstition grows up in a place like the different kinds of weeds” (78). While this latter assertion may hold some truth to him, however, its power largely vanishes once Wiltshire discovers that the source of the eerie sound he hears echoing through the forest is the product of what he misnames a “Tyrolean harp” (actually, of course, an “Aeolian harp” that is often mentioned in Romantic poetry) fashioned from a “candle box” and some banjo string (79). Soon, Wiltshire arrives at the centerpiece of Case’s schemes, the
“temple” in the midst of the forest. Remembering Case’s admission shortly after they met that “he was a good forger of island curiosities,” Wiltshire sees Case’s handiwork on full display:

Along all the top of it was a line of queer figures, idols, or scare-crows, or what not. They had carved and painted faces, ugly to view; their eyes and teeth were of shell; their hair and their bright clothes blew in the wind, and some of them worked with the tugging. [. . .] And the singular thing was that all these bogies were as fresh as toys out of a shop. (80)

In addition to repeating his admiration of Case’s ingenuity, however, Wiltshire’s primary reaction to this play castle in the middle of Falesá is a celebration of Case’s ability to control the naïve kanakas in such an astonishingly simple way:

With a box of tools and a few mighty simple contrivances, he had made out to have a devil of a temple. Any poor kanaka brought up here in the dark [. . .] would make no kind of doubt but he had seen and heard enough devils for a lifetime. It’s easy to find out what kanakas think. Just go back to yourself anyway round from ten to fifteen years old, and there’s an average kanaka. (81)

The crudeness of Wiltshire’s assumptions about “kanakas”—the very individuals whom he has married and befriended and who, in the case of Maea, he has recognized as politically savvy—offers a troubling and yet telling proof of his inconsistency. Similarly, once he returns to Uma and Maea, he announces to his wife, in a moment of both excitement and disdain, “Tell him the place is a blooming toyshop! Tell him in England we give these things to the kids to play with” (85). But it also leads us to a broader sense that Stevenson’s novella, despite its important revelations about the crass and selfish considerations at the heart of their endeavors, still presents white colonialists in the Pacific as fully capable of effectively controlling the natives of islands like Falesá.

While other critics have certainly noted Case’s success at manipulating his environment on Falesá, especially Ann Colley and Vanessa Smith, no one has yet moved
beyond an expression of regret to recognize its powerful (and potentially troubling) implications. Colley identifies Case as “a forger of memory” who “appropriates what was traditional and part of the island’s cultural heritage for his own advantage, and therefore misrepresents and compromises the integrity of the past” (94). Smith more directly asserts that Case succeeds because of his “ability to negotiate between cultures, and to play upon mutual assumptions” (173), but her main interest in Case lies in how his portrayal enables “a critique of Western economic motivations: he is a two-faced mimic of settler and indigenous practices” (176). What I think we must do, however, is to recognize the unhappy reality at the heart of Stevenson’s novella. There is little doubt that The Beach of Falesá calls into question certain assumptions about colonial efforts and their repercussions, especially, as Menikoff argues, “the pretensions of European politics—pretensions to doing good, to bringing religion and civilization to benighted peoples” (15). But he never questions the ability of white men like Case to achieve and maintain control over such colonial spaces. His second and final novella of the South Seas, The Ebb-Tide (1894), presents such a reality in even starker terms.

Living Out “Fairy Tales”: “Pretending” to Survive in The Ebb-Tide

In The Beach of Falesá, as we have seen, Case is able through a variety of schemes to achieve substantial control of local trade and physical dominion over a large forest on the island of Falesá. And the primary reason that his little “empire” meets its end is the arrival and direct (and ultimately fatal) intervention of another white man, Wiltshire. Thus, in this first “realistic” story of the South Seas, Stevenson presents a disturbing but limited case of colonial success while still offering some hope that local
cultures could successfully push back against such influences (though with crucial assistance from white men like Wiltshire). Two years later, in *The Ebb-Tide*, the final work of fiction that he published in his lifetime, Stevenson explores similar themes and presents a comparable situation. But this time, not even the arrival of three white men can do anything to stop or even limit the brutal power that Attwater wields over his atoll’s tiny population. While he demonstrates a level of sophistication and awareness about his situation that eludes all other characters in Stevenson’s novella, Attwater proves himself equally capable of almost childish petulance and cold-blooded action based on his savage and deeply disturbing beliefs. His success at remaking the atoll in his own image—or at least in the image of the “fairy tales” from which he has constructed his “new” life on the atoll—stands fittingly at the center of a novella in which each major character struggles with a decision to reject or embrace storytelling as a way to cope with the desperate conditions that they face.

A decade before he composed “Child’s Play,” Stevenson wrote in an 1871 letter to his cousin Maud Babington both of his interest in individuals’ attempts to justify their actions and beliefs to themselves and of how stories might prove indispensable to such a process:

[. . .] what one wants to know is not what people did, but why they did it — or rather, why they thought they did it; and to learn that, you should go to the men themselves. Their very falsehood is often more than another man’s truth. (Calder 25)

Stevenson’s intense interest in stories’ role in human psychology was already clear in the early works that had established his reputation as a popular and talented writer in the 1880s, particularly *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886). And, until his arrival in the Pacific, Stevenson remained “a writer whose value resided in his ability to
enchant a reader away from reflection and gather him up in the romance of history,” as Menikoff reminds us (10). But, as Stevenson himself made clear in dismissing previous Pacific fiction as being marred by an excess of romance, such enchanting and imaginative fiction would not be enough to address the complexities of the unevenly colonized world that he saw. So he set out to compose truly “realistic” fiction, creating the often bigoted and self-serving Wiltshire to narrate his own experiences on Falesá. His second novella of the South Seas would present still less admirable characters in a piece of fiction that even disgusted its own author. For, in addition to struggling mightily to make himself finish The Ebb-Tide, Stevenson offered this bleak judgment shortly after completing it: “Of grace, virtue, beauty, we get no glimpse. All we have in exchange is a picture of the fag-ends of certain useless and degraded lives” (Smith 156). But this assessment hardly does justice to a novella that, in fact, directly confronts how men who lead such lives use storytelling as a means of comfort in the most desperate of situations. And it also offers a frightening portrait of a man whose willingness to make abstraction not only of the objects around him but of the people as well—the behavior of a storytelling child—allows him to re-create an entire island as he sees fit.

At the center of The Ebb-Tide’s plot stand three vagabonds: Robert Herrick, an English expatriate and gentleman; John Davis, an American and a former sea captain; and J.L. Huish, an Englishman of decidedly lower class than his two counterparts. As the story opens, the trio lie within days of starvation on a beach on the isle of Papeete when

23Menikoff’s characterization of Stevenson’s reputation as a romantic writer whose fiction served a more or less escapist role does correctly summarize what the public and many critics thought of as Stevenson’s primary virtue in the 1880s. But the argument of this chapter and, indeed, this project as a whole, is that such instances of “adventure fiction” also pursued crucial questions of identity and control in colonial spaces. Unfortunately, such issues played little if any role in critical response to Stevenson’s work during his lifetime, even his unapologetically realistic South Seas novellas in the 1890s.
they are suddenly able to take charge of a ship known as the *Farallone*, a vessel whose crew and passengers have recently been infected with smallpox and which holds a large cargo of what they are told is champagne to be delivered to Australia. Once they depart, the three quickly decide to hijack the cargo and sell it in Peru instead, but they soon discover that their cargo largely consists of bottled water, not champagne. Fearful of returning to society because of their theft, the three land on what initially appears to be a deserted and uncharted atoll, which is actually home to an imposing white man named Attwater, who has an “interest in missions” but who has also made a fortune from the island’s pearls—and who rules the island with an iron fist. The climax of the novel occurs when Davis allows Huish to attempt Attwater’s murder. Huish dies but Davis is spared, and the novel features a remarkably equivocal ending in which Attwater retains his absolute control of the island, Davis has fully devoted himself to Christian penitence, and it is unclear whether Herrick will remain on the island or return to society (having burned the *Farallone* and, thus, the evidence of his crime).

In *The Ebb-Tide*, Stevenson meditates on a crucial choice that his characters constantly face: to engage in the act of “apologetic mythology”—essentially using stories to obfuscate the difficult realities of life—or to “face facts” and accept the harsh realities of their lives. Stevenson explains “apologetic mythology” more fully as Herrick, in despair over the danger that Attwater represents, ostensibly forces himself to reject this process:

> He had no tears, he told himself no stories. His disgust with himself was so complete, that even the process of apologetic mythology had ceased. He was like a man cast down from a pillar and every bone broken; he lay there, and admitted the facts, and did not attempt to rise. (225-6)
I will address this quotation in more detail later. But for now, I would contend that ultimately, though Herrick regularly demonstrates disdain for this process of “apologetic mythology,” Stevenson’s narrative and especially its plot demonstrate the necessity of such justifying narratives, particularly for those faced with the complex world of the South Pacific under colonialism. Indeed, the novella’s most sustained criticism of using narrative to conceal reality—and its association of such acts with an acute sense of shame—occur almost exclusively through the thoughts of Herrick, the protagonist and seemingly moral center of the novel, but a figure who is remarkably absent from and silent during its **denouement**. At the same time, much of the novel’s action, especially the behavior and assertions of Davis and Huish (and even, at times, Herrick himself), prove the undeniable worth of deliberately evolving potentially false narratives in order to cope with the harsh realities of life. Echoing both Stevenson’s metaphor in the conclusion to “Child’s Play” and his assertion of humans’ instinctive self-deception in “A Humble Remonstrance” (“Man’s one method, whether he reasons or creates, is to half-shut his eyes against the dazzle and confusion of reality”), Davis and Huish seek comfort from a relentlessly confusing existence by intentionally creating stories that conceal the dark realities that they face. And Herrick, all the while believing that he is bravely “facing facts,” ultimately becomes even more childlike than his friends, accepting Attwater’s brutal and self-serving story of domination as though he were a child who had just been read a fairy tale.

Both of these choices are present in the novel’s iconic opening chapter, in which Stevenson’s narrator introduces Herrick, Davis, and Huish on the beach of Papeete. Revealing that all three have adopted aliases and maintain them even among themselves,
the narrative launches into Herrick’s back-story, quickly revealing how deeply he feels the shame of his alias and the precipitous moral decline that it symbolizes. Trapped in a “coma of despair,” the narrator relates, Herrick “told himself no longer tales of an easy and perhaps agreeable declension” (11). In a moment of cynical but honest meditation on his own life, Herrick consciously denies himself the solace of cloaking his destitute position with stories. Yet, only a few pages later, immediately after a violent coughing fit by Huish, who has a severe case of influenza, Herrick basically volunteers to tell his companions a diverting story, a fantastical tale of traveling to London on a magic carpet and reuniting with his parents. Huish soon follows with his own, very different version of what he would do in London (drink and carouse through the night), and then Davis offers his own tale of reuniting with his own family moments later. But, in a moment that foreshadows the novel’s most sustained consideration of the benefits of stories even for adults, Davis abruptly ends his narrative when he mentions the name of his daughter, whom he has assured his mates is alive but whom he knows has long since passed away. Even in only the first of *The Ebb-Tide*’s twelve chapters, Stevenson’s narrative offers insistent rhetoric that seems to reject telling “tales” via Herrick’s self-accusing thoughts while simultaneously revealing how all three men achieve at least some success in their attempts at diversion by generating such tales.

While the act of telling stories to each other serves its purpose by providing at least a momentary diversion, Davis decides that he owes more to the family that he has left behind. Waking after another wretched night on the beach, Davis, realizing that he will almost certainly die without seeing his family again, goes into town and returns to the beach with paper, envelopes, and pencils so the three can compose farewell letters. In
response to his companions’ surprised looks, he explains, “It was that yarning last night about going home that put me up to it” (36). Neither the narrator nor Davis reveal the contents of their letters, but we do learn that Herrick, after deciding it would be too difficult to write to his father, composes a letter instead to his “sweetheart,” a text that largely focuses on apologizing for his failed life. Herrick again, it seems, wants to stick to the facts but cannot resist a bit of heroic exaggeration:

I should tell you I am well and happy and want for nothing. I do not exactly make money, or I should send a remittance; but I am well cared for, have friends, live in a beautiful place and climate, such as we have dreamed of together, and no pity need be wasted on me. (39)

The emotional weight of this letter, a free-flowing mix of harsh truth about Herrick’s failed life and reassuring embellishment, suggests a via media in its balance between truth and fiction. For what it reveals is that, in moments, Herrick feels a strong impulse toward being honest with himself, but it is when he considers the woman who will read his letter and share its news with his father that he feels compelled to put a brave face—indeed, a false spin—on the sad truth of what appear to be his final days. This tender moment, which compels the three to reveal their true names to each other, is quickly shattered when Huish reveals that he has written his letter to a barmaid he spent an evening with in Northampton not long ago, a document in which he “told her ‘ow I had got rich, and married a queen in the Hislands, and lived in a blooming palace” (42).

Fiction in the name of sparing loved ones’ endless sadness certainly seems to qualify as an appropriate and well-intentioned choice, but outright and bald-faced fiction is apparently a very different and questionable thing. As the narrator points out, Huish is fortunate to be “seized just then by one of his prostrating accesses of cough; his comrades would else have deserted him, so bitter was their resentment” (43).
From the nature of the farewell letters that the trio writes, we see a clear demonstration of the affective importance of storytelling. But as the trio’s adventure aboard the *Farallone* begins, Davis’s insistent and aggressive use of fictions, including the aliases that they had abandoned amongst themselves, reveals a directly practical aspect. And, as he does so, Stevenson’s serious and realistic novella suddenly comes to resemble the child’s play that he explored more than a decade earlier. Davis, already experienced as a sea captain, almost instinctively decides that a hierarchy with a strong and unquestioned captain must be established on board, regardless of whatever half-truths and even complete falsehoods that effort may require. Thus it is that, in a matter of a few minutes, John Davis, former captain of the *Sea Ranger*, becomes Captain Brown of the *Farallone*; Robert Herrick (a man with no experience as a sailor) becomes Mr. Hay, Brown’s trusty first mate; and Huish (despite his initial resistance to Davis’s curt and dismissive conduct toward him) is established merely as a cabin steward aboard the ship. From here, the scene takes on a seriocomic air, as Herrick, asked to call the crew to order, nervously searches his brain for the appropriate language, delivering from his memory of “sea romance” these words: “Here, men, tumble aft! [. . .] Lively now! All hands aft!” (70). This, in turn, leads to a generically appropriate speech in which “Captain Brown” declares, “If you’re smart and quick, I’ll make this ship comfortable for all hands. [. . .] If you’re not [. . .] I’ll make it a floating hell” (71).24 Perhaps caught up in the moment (or perhaps not), Davis is not content simply to assign fictional names and positions to his

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24Had he been alive to read this particular passage, Melville likely would have bristled at its parodic treatment of a harsh, even abusive captain. Between his early exotic novels and his masterpiece *Moby-Dick*, Melville wrote an excoriating novel of the brutal treatment of sailors that he witnessed in the United States Navy entitled *White-Jacket* (1850).
companions but, stymied by the similar appearance and unintelligible language of the crew on board, he announces a set of nicknames for them instead: “There! We know who we all are—Dungaree, Uncle Ned, Sally Day, White Man, and Cook” (72). In a scene where fiction becomes a weapon of control, and where Davis knows he must keep his poker face throughout, Herrick is content to play along, clearly reveling in his ability to put to use the sea fiction he has read in his real life as though he were participating in child’s play. Echoing The Beach of Falesá, the crew members quietly acquiesce to Davis’s will, suggesting once again that whites have a superior ability to assert control over space, even the confined quarters of the Farallone. At the same time, though, this incident certainly does not offer an inspiring model of how Europeans might deal with the “kanakas” of the region. However, the fierce discipline that Davis asserts is quickly undermined by his and Huish’s decided lack of self-control, as they enter a period during which they remain almost constantly intoxicated from the champagne onboard. Their embarrassing behavior also leads Herrick back into his relentless self-laments. In a novel that ponders whether adults can justifiably use narrative to cope, this remarkable scene represents the most exact replication of child’s play in either of Stevenson’s South Seas novellas, as if it were pulled directly from boy’s fiction rather than the decidedly adult fiction that The Ebb-Tide represents.

While Herrick’s abandonment of “apologetic mythology” near the end of the novel represents its strongest pronouncement on this issue, its counterbalance, indeed the novel’s most insistent assertion of the value of “pretending” as a means of preserving the

25 In assigning names to many of the crew, Davis also invites two very different but very resonant comparisons: Adam, the first man who names all of the animals in the garden of Eden; and American slave owners who often chose names for their slaves for the same reason—that their actual names were too hard to pronounce.
psyche, appears well before Attwater is even introduced. Immediately following the
Farallone’s near sinking after drifting into a storm, Herrick finally confronts Davis over
his persistent drunkenness. Harking back to the sinking of the Sea Ranger, Davis’s
previous ship (an accident that resulted in six deaths), Herrick warns, “You’re going to
drown here the same way as you drowned others, and be damned. And your daughter
shall walk the streets, and your sons be thieves like their father” (106). This is a vicious
attack, but one that achieves its aims, as Davis swears to abandon his drinking for the
remainder of the voyage. But it also leads to a surprising revelation from Davis.
Explaining his intense reaction to Herrick’s venomous words about his children, Davis
says, “I want to tell you why it hit me so hard; I kind of think you’ll feel bad about it too.
It’s about my little Adar. You hadn’t ought to have quite said that—but of course I know
you did n’t know. She—she’s dead, you see” (112). While Herrick can only look “upon
him with something that was almost terror,” Davis forcefully defends his deception:

Don’t think I’m crazy, neither. [. . .] I’ve all the cold sense that I know
what to do with. But I guess a man that’s unhappy’s like a child; and this
is a kind of a child’s game of mine. I never could act up to the plain-out
truth, you see. So I pretend. And I warn you square: as soon as we’re
through with this talk, I’ll start in again with the pretending. (113-4,
emphasis added)

In plain words, Davis makes a stark and unrepentant case for consciously and
systematically forgetting his daughter’s death. Even more importantly, he explains that
this deliberate choice to “pretend” stems from his childlike need for some means of
assuaging his grief. Yet his assertion of the power and necessity of “pretending” here
goes beyond dealing (or, more precisely, refusing to deal) with the grief of his daughter’s
death, particularly as Attwater appears and demonstrates the astounding potential of
pretending.
“Oh, I Can Do Anything”: Attwater’s Absolute Control of Space

Like Stevenson’s child storytellers before him and Conrad’s Kurtz after him, Attwater is a man filled with contradictions but not constrained by them. Why? Because, like Stevenson’s child, “He can make abstraction of whatever does not fit into his fable” (“Child’s Play” 131); and like Kurtz, “He [can] get himself to believe anything—anything” (Heart of Darkness 154). Even the trio’s first glimpse of him on his atoll makes this clear, as the narrator explains: “[Attwater] wore white clothes, the full dress of the tropics. [. . .] his voice sounded like a gentleman’s. [. . .] A complexion naturally dark had been tanned in the island to a hue hardly distinguishable from that of a Tahitian; only his manners and movements [. . .] betrayed the European” (146-47). “Hardly distinguishable” from the other inhabitants of the atoll by sight, Attwater has nevertheless maintained the bearing of an English gentleman. But he also still carries the narrow beliefs of some gentlemen, and his “silken brutality” soon leads him to a deliberate attempt to use class to divide and defeat his new foes.

Much like Case in his initial attempts to befriend Wiltshire based on their common heritage, Attwater makes painfully clear from the beginning his fondness for his fellow “gentleman” Herrick while barely attempting to hide his disdain for Davis and especially for Huish (since his thick Cockney accent instantly reveals his lower class). Herrick’s initial reaction to Attwater’s tactless behavior introduces the mixture of attraction and repulsion that will define their relationship: “That he [Herrick] should be accepted as an equal, and the others thus pointedly ignored, pleased him in spite of himself, and then ran through his veins in a recoil of anger” (150-51). Yet, Attwater’s game seems destined to work, as Herrick joins Attwater in uttering the “conventional
phrases” and affecting a “false measure of society” as Attwater invites him and his companions to “dinner” (153). Yet, while the chance to act like a “grown-up” with Attwater is a welcome change from the immaturity of his drunken shipmates, Herrick’s unwillingness to embrace Attwater’s “savage” and self-serving view of religion leads to a moment of shocking and childish petulance. Refusing to agree with Attwater’s zealous assertion that the divers’ helmets that allow him to maintain a lucrative search for pearls in the lagoon, as well as everything on the island, are part of “God’s grace,” Herrick responds to Attwater’s accusation that he does not believe in God, “Not in your sense, I am afraid” (170). Attwater continues his attempts to convert Herrick to his view of religion while also continuing to denounce Davis and Huish as “two vulgar wolves” who seek to prey on Herrick (just as Attwater does, of course) and matter-of-factly admitting, “I dislike men, and I hate women” (175). Finally, after one aggressive and overtly religious final attempt to get Herrick to repent, Attwater’s slick and mature façade falls violently away, if only for a moment: “The rapture was all gone from Attwater’s countenance; the dark apostle had disappeared, and in his place there stood an easy, sneering gentleman, who took off his hat and bowed. It was pertly done, and the blood burned in Herrick’s face” (178-79). As Stevenson’s readers soon discover, however, this sharp moment of petulance is just the first hint at the childishness that lies behind Attwater’s fierce and intimidating presence.

Part of what makes Attwater so powerful yet also so puzzling is that he is, even more than most human beings, a living and breathing muddle of contradictions. He is fiercely religious and unapologetically self-interested. He is charming one moment and malicious the next. And, most importantly, he possesses a mature sense of what needs to
be done to preserve his position alongside a childlike assurance that whatever he believes is true and an equally childlike ability to make an abstraction of anyone or anything that stands in his way. Admitting that he stumbled upon the island just as Herrick and his companions did, Attwater explains how he quickly combined an “interest in missions” with an even stronger interest in the countless pearls in the island’s lagoon as he asserted control over the island. Of those contradictory impulses, Attwater tells Herrick, “I was a man of the world before I was a Christian; I’m a man of the world still, and I made my mission pay” (172). It was a very adult desire for wealth that initially drove Attwater to stay, but his decision to attempt to reform the island according to his view of religion ends up looking and sounding more like an elaborate game. Revealing his frustration both with his potential proselytes and with his God, Attwater complains, “I gave these beggars what they wanted,—a judge in Israel, the bearer of the sword and scourge. I was making a new people here, and behold! the angel of the Lord smote them, and they were not!” (172-73). Attwater’s game of “making a new people” could only be spoiled by an act of God; until a smallpox epidemic wiped out much of the island’s population, Attwater treated many of them as something closer to dolls or toy soldiers than human beings. Meeting a young woman who works as a servant in Attwater’s house, Herrick remarks, “She is pretty” (184). Attwater’s casual response reveals how abstract her life is to him:

Too pretty. [. . .] That was why I had her married. A man never knows when he may be inclined to be a fool about women: so when we were left alone, I had the pair of them to the chapel and performed the ceremony. She made a lot of fuss. I do not take at all the romantic views of marriage [. . .] (184-85)

26This idea of avoiding contact with native women in order to stay focused on a larger goal is also evident in Kipling’s story “The Man Who Would Be King,” in which the two white men who have established their “kingdom” in a remote part of Asia make a contract between them that forbids them to have either alcohol or women.
This forced marriage has nothing to do with her desire or even her well-being; Attwater simply wishes to preserve his sexual purity because he knows that “I may look to make an excellent marriage when I go home” (185). Like a child playing house for his own amusement, Attwater treats the two islanders as though they were equally lifeless dolls whose opinions do not matter and whose lives he can and does permanently change on a whim. Attwater also displays the callousness that child storytellers are capable of when relating a story of island “justice.” Explaining how he had a quiet man (“Sullens,” he deems him) and a loud and boisterous man (“Obsequiousness”) working at his fishery, Attwater vaguely tells of how Sullens repeatedly “got into trouble; no matter how” (200). After several weeks of this, Sullens abandons the settlement and, when Attwater finds him two days later, he has hanged himself. Attwater offers no lament for the dead man, though he is angry that he blamed the wrong man. To punish the real culprit, Obsequiousness, Attwater leads his workers down the beach, where they discover Sullens’s body still hanging from the tree. Attwater allows Obsequiousness to climb the tree and then murders him in cold blood. Along the way, Attwater offers pithy judgments of the men that sound like the words of a disappointed parent, and, in his pronouncement that “the regulations of the place are formal upon one point: we allow no explanations,” his “we” sounds like the plural form used by kings and queens (201). Sometimes a tyrant, sometimes a parent, sometimes a king, and often a child, Attwater plays his own game by his own rules on the atoll that he haphazardly discovered. Stevenson says of children that no one “can look more callously upon life, or rate the reproduction more highly over the reality; and they will parody an execution, a deathbed, or the funeral of the young man of Nain, with all the cheerfulness in the world” (“Child’s Play” 133). But one of his most
disturbing creations, Attwater, plays out an actual execution and watches a man die “with all the cheerfulness in the world” and tells the story of that day without a single regret.

How could Attwater not only commit such acts but also have the audacity to brag about them? The answer is his unique and self-serving interpretation of religion, which he declares “a savage thing, like the universe it illuminates; savage, cold, and bare, but infinitely strong” (172). He makes this declaration shortly before eagerly justifying his economic exploitation of the atoll and its inhabitants. But his belief that he represents God’s agent on the island, or “the bearer of the sword and scourge,” in Attwater’s words, becomes even clearer as he explains the “fairy tales” he sometimes tells himself for his own diversion. Reinforcing his earlier insistence that every object on the atoll represented “God’s grace” to him, Attwater seeks to prove that his island is not as deserted as it seems. He rings a “silver bell” before announcing, “Empty houses, empty sea, solitary beaches! [. . .] And yet God hears the bell! And yet we sit on this veranda, on a lighted stage, with all heaven for spectators!” (194). Imagining himself not as a humble servant but as a celebrated performer on a stage watched by “all heaven,” Attwater aggrandizes himself on an almost cosmic level. Yet, moments later, Attwater demonstrates a surprising and remarkable awareness—the only time he does so—that his complex and self-serving beliefs might not represent absolute truth. As he “laugh[s] softly,” Attwater admits, “These are the diversions of a lonely man [. . .] and possibly not in good taste. One tells one’s self these little fairy tales for company” (195). For one remarkable moment, our view of Attwater replicates our first glimpse of the trio of Herrick, Davis, and Huish on the beach in Chapter 1. But Attwater’s self-deprecation does not actually undercut his certainty of his cosmic importance, as he quickly affirms that the “least beat
of [his] heart, and the least thought in my mind, echo[es] into eternity for ever” (195).

Attwater remains the same brutal being that Herrick first identifies behind his “ambiguous and sneering mask,” a man defined by his chilling self-possession despite his contradictions: “Iron cruelty, an iron insensibility to the suffering of others, the uncompromising pursuit of his own interests, cold culture, manners without humanity” (171). These attitudes, coupled with his absolute control over the island, drive Attwater’s ruthless treatment not only of the island’s inhabitants but especially of Davis and Huish in the novella’s final confrontation.

During perhaps The Ebb-Tide’s ugliest and most disturbing scene, Huish’s fatally flawed attempt to kill Attwater and Davis’s forced conversion at gunpoint make plain just how callous and religiously confused the master of the atoll truly is. The outcome of Huish’s unsophisticated plan is a foregone conclusion before he even steps on the shore; before he can throw the bottle of vitriol, Attwater shoots it, causing it to burst in his hands and set him on fire before Attwater ends his life. But Attwater’s behavior immediately following Huish’s death is equally unsettling, as Attwater gives Davis “sixty seconds to make your peace with God” (263). In the meantime, he plays one more game with Davis, who stands frozen in front of a statue; Attwater fires a bullet every few seconds, missing Davis each time by inches. Davis, realizing his impending death, accepts Attwater’s offer, speaking a prayer on behalf of his children. Attwater, apparently satisfied with Davis’s prayer, allows him to live, offering a benediction that blends the forgiving God of the New Testament with the vengeful one of the Old Testament. “Is your peace made with Heaven? Because it is with me. Go, and sin no more, sinful father. And remember that whatever you do to others, God shall visit it again a thousand fold
upon your innocents” (265). Officially forgiven by God’s apparent representative on the island, Davis instantly begins acting like a true penitent, praying almost unceasingly. Herrick has survived by yielding to Attwater’s will. And Attwater reigns supreme over his island, as unchallenged and untroubled as ever.

While Stevenson was composing The Ebb-Tide’s final chapters in 1893, he relentlessly professed in his letters how he felt reluctant if not actually incapable of producing the dark ending that this “grim” and “gloomy” novel demanded. This antipathy seems to relate primarily to two specific aspects of the closing chapters of The Ebb-Tide that I want to emphasize. First, the prelude to the anticlimactic confrontation between Herrick and Attwater on one side and Davis and Huish on the other ultimately relies on their commitment to a fiction of fatalism and, along with it, an embrace of a debilitating passivity. In addition, in the novel’s strikingly nonjudgmental and unresolved conclusion, narratives essentially win the day, but each of the three survivors depends on very different narratives. Thus, though in a muted and even ambivalent way, Stevenson’s last word on the South Seas does mark an acceptance of pretending in an adult context. This fiction of passivity arises during two crucial moments in Stevenson’s novella. The first, Herrick’s willful disavowal of what he calls “apologetic mythology,” demonstrates an apparent commitment to, as he says, “admitt[ing] the facts” (226). Yet this leads not to an active rebellion against Attwater but to a final declaration of his self-disgust and, in effect, a willingness to play along with Attwater’s virtual self-deification.

I have nothing left that I believe in, except my living horror of myself. Why do I come to you? I don’t know. You are cold, cruel, hateful; and I hate you, or I think I hate you. But you are an honest man, an honest gentleman. I put myself helpless in your hands. (228)
This also represents, of course, something akin to a moment of religious conversion, at least rhetorically. But Herrick hardly behaves like a new convert in the end, retaining his cynicism and thus exposing this moment as a calculated choice to join Attwater rather than be destroyed by him that has nothing to do with religion. Davis, in a similar way, overcomes his severe distaste for Huish’s murderous plan and cowers in the background as it fails spectacularly. In doing so, the narrator announces, Davis “suffered himself to be carried, passively consenting, silently bidding farewell to his better self and his hopes” (a sentence that ironically seems much more suited to Herrick’s continual self-loathing).

In fact, while Stevenson had previously called this novella *The Pearl Fisher* and *The Schooner Farallone*, he ultimately settled on its eventual title, one that emphasizes the theme of allowing oneself to be carried along by “the ebb-tide in man’s affairs”—the very definition of passivity.

What ultimately may have caused Stevenson to express such strong disappointment in *The Ebb-Tide*’s concluding chapters, however, is not simply that they feature Huish’s gruesome death and Davis’s almost equally appalling conversion at the point of a gun (especially since his earlier novel, *The Wrecker* (1892), is noted for its often intense violence). In the ruthless world that the novella portrays, “pretending”—or, more precisely, the significance of formulating an effective justifying narrative for the self—proves to be absolutely essential to survival. Attwater easily triumphs over his foes, in the process getting to demonstrate his mercy to both Herrick and Davis and, thus, undoubtedly believing that he remains God’s agent on the island. Davis, who we last see praying intently until Herrick interrupts him, has completely submitted himself to Attwater’s tutelage and committed to a Christian life (or at least Attwater’s unique
version of Christianity). The narrative offers no judgment of Attwater’s destructive behavior, allowing his tyranny to continue; no expression of regret over Huish’s death or Davis’s conversion, despite the violent and nauseating nature of both; and no resolution to the dilemma that Herrick faces, with his loyalties in limbo and his future difficult to imagine. Ultimately, despite its important rendering of how narrative, of shaping life’s events into a story and sometimes adding fictional elements as well, functions in the lives of these white vagabonds in the Pacific—a story about the power of stories—The Ebb-Tide’s ending makes it a decidedly unsatisfactory story.

Unlike Ahab and Kurtz, Attwater emerges from his experience virtually unscathed. Combining a powerful faith in his own righteousness with a keen understanding of what he must do to maintain control, he is, at least in some ways, a fitting example of Stevenson’s South Seas fiction. Similar to Case and his control of the copra trade on Falesá, Attwater uses stories as weapons for his own advantage in unapologetically exploiting the lagoon for its lucrative collection of pearls. While Attwater remains confident that he acts on God’s behalf on the island, his momentary admission that he tells himself “fairy tales” actually reveals him to be even more calculating. Stories, which hold the promise of salvation and survival for the three beachcombers who stumble upon the atoll after drunkenly drifting at sea, represent a means of power and control for Attwater, whose identity never seems to have been threatened by his new life in the South Seas. Driven by his own ego and desire for even more wealth, Attwater views his island workers as pieces on a chess board that he can manipulate with ease. And Stevenson’s “grim” and “gloomy” tale of the South Seas does
nothing to suggest that Attwater’s miniature empire faces any threat of disappearing (at least until the final pearl is discovered in the lagoon).

While Stevenson’s journals and other nonfiction during his final years constantly reveal that he was substantially troubled by the repercussions of ongoing colonial efforts in the region, his Pacific fiction never questions the sustainability of places that are essentially controlled by white fantasies like Case’s “bedeviled” forest on Falesá or Attwater’s atoll—fictional counterparts to Pacific spaces colonized by a host of European countries in the last half of the nineteenth century. None of Stevenson’s white characters in his two South Seas novellas—Wiltshire, Herrick, Davis, and especially Attwater—learn any lessons or make any fundamental changes in their beliefs or their behavior. And they do not change because, in the end, there are no lessons to be learned—both *The Beach of Falesá* and *The Ebb-Tide* ultimately end with battles of wits, fortitude, and technology *between white men*. Uma might be present for the explosion in the forest, but she is there only as a spectator and certainly not a participant in the “battle,” lying silent and terrified while waiting to discover if Wiltshire has prevailed in his final combat with Case. And Maea waits for Wiltshire to destroy Case’s “temple” before coming to glimpse the ruins. The outcome of what we can barely even call a “battle” near the end of *The Ebb-Tide* seems decided well before Huish and Davis step off their boat, and Attwater’s iron grip on the island and his equally unwavering belief in his own righteousness remain wholly intact. No matter how seriously these novellas take the issue of storytelling and its role in coping with the challenges of life in the Pacific, their conclusions focus almost solely on physical confrontations more typical of the adventure tradition begun by Marryat and other authors decades earlier. Thus, the lack of resolution in the action of
both tales, especially *The Ebb-Tide*, also denies any resolution to their consideration of the role of stories in adult lives.

The passing of Robert Louis Stevenson in 1894 at the age of only 44 leaves us to wonder if his fiction would have continued to confront in even starker terms the need for colonialists to create new narratives as a way of surviving and adapting to a vagabond world in which their expected “superiority” never existed in the first place. However, the trend of his works in his final five years certainly points in this direction, as we have seen in Stevenson’s *The Beach of Falesá* (1893) and particularly *The Ebb-Tide* (1894), with its stunning exposure of the need for a usable narrative to replace the “white man’s burden,” even among those who were hardly militant imperialists. At the same time, Stevenson still assumes that stories can be effectively used to maintain political control over colonial spaces with relative ease. Perhaps his fiction would have begun to show an increasing awareness of the colonized peoples of those islands, as his nonfiction essays, including those published in the collection *In the South Seas* (1896) did. Jenni Calder, a biographer of Stevenson, confidently asserts, “Louis was compulsively a Scottish novelist yet, if we are looking for clues as to what he might have done, the evidence suggests that he might have become most memorably a novelist of the contemporary Pacific scene, an explorer of alienation and isolation, an analyst of values, akin to Joseph Conrad” (316). Ultimately, Stevenson’s late adventure fiction represents an early harbinger of adventure fiction’s process of becoming increasingly honest about colonialists’ struggles to cope with the spaces produced by their efforts in foreign lands as a new century approached.
That was his idea of his duty to himself—to his race—to his respectable connections; to the whole universe unsettled and shaken by this frightful catastrophe of his life. He saw it clearly and believed he was a strong man. He had always prided himself upon his unflinching firmness. And yet he was afraid.

*Almayer’s Folly*

It was not death that frightened him: it was the horror of bewildered life where he could understand nothing and nobody round him; where he could guide, control, comprehend nothing and no one—not even himself.

*An Outcast of the Islands*

Hate filled the world, filled the space between them—the hate of race, the hate of hopeless diversity, the hate of blood; the hate against the man born in the land of lies and of evil from which nothing but misfortune comes to those who are not white.

*An Outcast of the Islands*

Even as Stevenson was facing death half a world away, his fictional project of revealing the complex choices that colonialists faced in attempting to adapt to a changing world was evolving in the hands of an as yet unknown novelist, Joseph Conrad. At the rather advanced age of 37, Conrad spent much of 1894 feverishly working to finish his powerful debut on the English literary scene, *Almayer’s Folly*, which was published on April 29, 1895 (less than five months after Stevenson’s death). This first novel was generally well received by critics but failed to capture the interest of the large audiences who regularly devoured adventure fiction by Haggard and, to a lesser degree,
Stevenson. At the same time, though, Ian Watt is right to identify Conrad’s small debt to Stevenson and Kipling for “their part in creating an audience for exotic narrative” (Conrad in the Nineteenth Century, 43). More importantly, though, Stevenson’s late fiction had begun a process of subverting such adventure fiction from within that Conrad’s early novels would take to more profound depths. Indeed, rather than simply portraying the colonial point of view of the clash between cultures, as nearly all previous examples of adventure fiction had, Conrad used his early works to expose the colonial world as a place of not just competing political interests but, more importantly, competing narratives of cultures and of individual selves. Offering an unprecedented view of the challenges that colonial spaces presented to all of their inhabitants by exploring the psyches of Malays and Arabs in addition to Europeans, Conrad began his career with two novels that captured, as no previous work had, the hostile universe of the Malay Archipelago, a place of struggle and insecurity, a space that defied its inhabitants’ attempts at self-definition. In the process, he reveals how those who cannot evolve beyond their own narrow worldviews, especially those like Almayer who are of European descent but remain unable to occupy expected positions of power, face harrowing consequences in increasingly globalized spaces that demand broader and more fluid understandings of humanity.

27 The Daily Chronicle, a London daily of the period, offered a prediction that would take nearly two decades to come to fruition: “Mr. Conrad may go on, and with confidence; he will find his public, and he deserves his place (xliii). T.P. O’Connor’s review in the Weekly Sun was even more effusive: “This is a book a few people have already read with rapture; by-and-bye everybody will have read it, and then the world will know that a great new writer and a new and splendid region of romance have entered into our literature” (xlii). But their hopes remained unrealized; Conrad’s publisher, Edward Garnett, reported: “Mr. Rice tells me that the majority of the copies [of Almayer’s Folly] rested for years on the booksellers’ shelves, and that the title Almayer’s Folly long remained a jest in ‘the trade’ at his own expense” (xlii). This unfortunate disconnect between critics and readers haunted much of Conrad’s career, until the surprising successes of ‘Twixt Land and Sea (1912) and Chance (1914) redefined Conrad as a cherished and popular novelist of the English people.
While others had certainly begun to examine the psychic challenges facing fictional imperialists in Africa, India, and the South Pacific, no previous author of British adventure fiction had explored the individual consequences of colonial efforts quite so thoroughly or honestly as Conrad. Haggard’s ubiquitous narrator, Allan Quatermain, may be able in brief moments to recognize the darker sides of imperialism, but the conclusions of his tales suggest that individuals can partake of the “adventure” of empire relatively unscathed. In Stevenson’s later fiction, certainly, the personal consequences of imperialism are far from ideal, but, even in the iconic moment on the beach near the beginning of *The Ebb-Tide*, the narrative hardly adopts a tragic tone, though the three vagabonds face near certain death (only to be rescued moments later, of course). In the hands of Joseph Conrad, however, the adventure fiction of Britain’s colonial project was largely stripped of its jingoism and transformed into a more fitting genre: the adventure *tragedy*. Few of Conrad’s works, including his most famous novels, end well, of course; but Conrad’s first two novels, *Almayer’s Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896), draw their power from an unflinching examination of the challenge of hybridity in a place without a dominant culture or political force. Both colonizers and colonized drive these tragic plots by rejecting hybridity in their own ways, as we will see. But it is Conrad’s portrayal of imperialists’ destructive attempts to maintain “purity” from Malay and Arab influences, to resist what Conrad’s contemporary Sir Hugh Clifford called “denationalisation,” that breaks stunning new ground in adventure fiction, exposing the stories that individuals use to deny hybrid influences and, ultimately, demonstrating the tragic consequences of their failure to adapt to a changing world.
“Annexing” the Malay Archipelago: Conrad’s Contemporaries

Early reviews of *Almayer’s Folly* would both credit Conrad for “annexing ‘the island of Borneo’” and announce that he “might become the Kipling of the Malay Archipelago” (Sherry 47, 49), but several of Conrad’s contemporaries also offered accounts of Malay life to English reading audiences. Frank Swettenham, Sir Hugh Clifford, and Alfred Russel Wallace all spent considerably more time in the Malay Archipelago but seem to have been much less troubled by what they saw, at least in terms of the psychic costs of confronting hybridity.28 Swettenham (1850-1946) came to Singapore in 1871 and held a number of administrative positions in Southeast Asia during the next three decades, eventually rising to become High Commissioner of the Federation of Malay States from 1901-04 (Hampson 190). In addition, Swettenham authored several books, including *Malay Sketches*, which appeared shortly before *Almayer’s Folly* in 1895. The “Introduction” to these sketches is a study in contrasts, as its author moves in five short paragraphs from holding Malaya up as an undiscovered paradise to emphasizing how the “Juggernaut of Progress” is poised to forever transform it at the hands “of a stronger will and a higher intelligence” (x). Written before he rose to the upper echelons of imperial administration in the region, Swettenham’s words do seem to strive for a sympathetic view of the Malays, emphasizing that they have lived “unseeking and unsought” but that “the enemy has at last passed your gate, [. . .] slain your beasts, cut down your forests, ‘civilised’ your people, clothed them in strange garments, and stamped them with the seal of higher morality” (x). But his scare quotes are inconsistent and unconvincing, as he marks “civilised” and “awakening” but

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28 For a more elaborate discussion of these two important figures, see Chapter 3 of Hampson’s *Cross-Cultural Encounters in Joseph Conrad’s Malay Fiction*, entitled “The Inward Turn: Wallace and Clifford.”
unapologetically speaks of imperialists’ “higher morality” and “higher intelligence” (x-xi). Further, both Swettenham’s writings and what we know of his life point to a greater inconsistency, a cognitive dissonance that marked many writers of his time who were able to recognize the flaws of imperialism while still endorsing its larger and more benevolent aims. Indeed, historian J.M. Gullick relates the complicated story of how Swettenham came to befriend a Malay raja. As compelling as the fact of their eventual friendship is, certainly it is marred by the fact that Swettenham’s change of heart occurred only after the raja had saved the author’s life (Gullick 10-11). Unlike Conrad, who never exercised authority over any Malays, Swettenham spent decades in administrative positions, and, despite scattered friendships with Malays, his words reveal the limited perspective of an imperialist whose control was never threatened and who can thus lament the “Juggernaut of Progress” even as he aids its advance. In addition, there is no room for hybridity in Swettenham’s vision of the colonization of Malaya, as he anticipates a swift and not entirely detrimental erasure of Malay culture in favor of more civilized ways.

For Sir Hugh Clifford (1866-1941), a colonial administrator in the Malay region for nearly five decades, living among the Malay population ultimately crystallized a potent fear of what he called “‘denationalisation’—the danger of the European coming too close to the Malay and losing his own cultural identity” (Gullick 27). In particular, Clifford explored and ultimately dismissed this fear in a 1903 novel, A Freelance of Today.29 Yet earlier in his career, particularly in the 1897 nonfiction work In Court and Kampong, Clifford was able to offer a striking metaphor for the impact of imperialism on the Malay Archipelago. Ruminating on that imperial influence, the administrator and

29See Hampson, 93-98, for an extended reading of Clifford’s novel.
occasional scholar reveals his concerns by reversing one of the most enduring literary symbols of imperialism:

In these days, the boot of the ubiquitous white man leaves its marks on all the fair places of the Earth, and scores thereon an even more gigantic track than that which affrighted Robinson Crusoe in his solitude. It crushes down the forests, beats out roads, strides across the rivers, kicks down native institutions, and generally tramples on the growths of nature, and the works of primitive man, reducing all things to that dead level of conventionality, which we call civilisation. ([In Court and Kampong, 1-2]

At least early in his career, then, Clifford had a sense that imperialism damages as much as it repairs, inspiring a marked ambivalence about colonialism’s costs that leads him to conclude, “though it relieves them of many things which hurt and oppressed them ere it came, it injures them morally almost as much as it benefits them materially” (Hampson 82). Yet Clifford’s 1898 collection of stories, *Studies in Brown Humanity*, relentlessly infantilizes the Malays while also falling back on more common and essentializing Victorian stereotypes of the “White Man” and the “Brown Man.” Robert Hampson also notes Clifford’s growing concern with transgressive sexual relations, a specific type of denationalisation that lies at the center of Conrad’s *An Outcast of the Islands* as well (85-86). Further, Clifford’s novel *A Freelance of Today* (1903) and his later nonfiction works show he still kept faith that the Malays would be delivered from what he considered their medieval simplicity through colonialism. In that 1903 work, he does take his protagonist Maurice Curzon through a process of denationalization among the Malays, but the only horror that Curzon experiences, in time to avoid such a “dark” fate, lies in his apparent realization that the Malays are “devils, not men” (Hampson 95). In dehumanizing the Malays and fleeing back to “civilisation,” Curzon (and, by extension, Clifford) explodes the very possibility of hybridity by reifying the essentialist and absolute distinctions
between Malays and Europeans, just as Conrad’s fictional characters and even his own narrators do in his first two novels.

**Instability and Division: Wallace’s *The Malay Archipelago***

Unlike Clifford and Swettenham, whose work appeared too late to influence Conrad’s earliest fiction, the writings of Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913) were both readily available and highly influential for Conrad and his depiction of the Malay Archipelago. Indeed, Wallace’s most famous work, *The Malay Archipelago* (1869), served as Conrad’s primary source for his early Malay fiction. A middle-class Welshman who began his adult life as a schoolteacher, Wallace soon allowed his insatiable interest in collecting insects (especially beetles) for scientific observation to lead him from his homeland to the depths of the Amazonian rainforest and then, from 1854 to 1862, to what he preferred to call the Malay Archipelago (a more precise geographical term for the region then known as the Dutch East Indies) (Winchester 56-57). Wallace’s primary interest in the region lay in exhaustively mapping the area as well as documenting the many different species of flora and fauna. He was also driven there by what Simon Winchester identifies as “two growing beliefs: that geography was highly influential in the development of biology, and that species originated by the natural selection of favored types from within the variations of any population” (58). Supporting evidence for his first “belief” appeared three years after Wallace arrived in the region, as the findings of another British scientist in the region, Philip Lutley Sclater, gave added inspiration to his activity. Sclater, focusing solely on the bird populations of the various islands in the
archipelago, discovered that two distinct groups of birds could be identified—and that a fairly precise geographical delineation could be drawn between the two avian groups.

Pursuing comparable methods of observation and zoogeography in observing numerous species, Wallace discovered a similar phenomenon among numerous other plants and animals of the region, again observing two dissimilar groups that occupied specific geographic locations, often on islands separated by only a few miles of ocean. Based on this wider proof of separate but distinct groups of species in the region, Wallace theorized a geographical boundary, which became known as the Wallace Line, that divided the archipelago roughly in half to represent the boundary between the two groups. In describing this Line, which was based solely on his exhaustive observation and cataloguing of numerous animal species, Wallace makes a crucial connection with the human populations of the region in his work *The Malay Archipelago*, a passage that would clearly have influenced Conrad as he created his early Malay fiction:

[I]t is important to point out the harmony which exists between the line of separation of the human races of the Archipelago and that of the animal productions of the same country, which I have already so fully explained and illustrated. The dividing lines do not, it is true, exactly agree; but I think it is a remarkable fact, and something more than a mere coincidence, that they should traverse the same district and approach each other so closely as they do. (454)

Beyond being an important early episode in the eventual realization of plate tectonics and modern geology, Wallace’s findings and his famous Line—as well as his speculations in this final chapter of his definitive work on the Malay region—would have offered two seeming truths about the Malay Archipelago in Conrad’s eyes: 1. that the region had experienced a long history of seismic instability and, not entirely coincidentally, of political instability, especially in more recent times and 2. that such geologic history had
created two isolated and distinctive sets of species, including isolated groups of human beings. Conrad was an author who readily admitted an early and enduring fascination with geography (celebrated particularly in his 1924 essay, “Geography and Some Explorers”), and his fiction shows obvious sympathies with scientific findings of his time, particularly in terms of absorbing the basic principles of Darwinian thought. Given these realities as well as the dark conclusions of both *Almayer’s Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*, I would suggest that both of these concepts—relentless instability and flux and yet distinctly isolated groups—partially underlay Conrad’s choice to end both novels with a resounding failure of any hybrid middle ground—endings that primarily find characters reifying distinctions of race/nationality that both colonizers and colonized created.

Wallace’s scientific project also allowed him to view Malay culture up close, particularly as he held no employment and often relied on local hospitality for food and shelter (unlike Swettenham and Clifford, who spent decades as imperial administrators). Indeed, as biographer Martin Fichman emphasizes, his “Malay travels were as much a personal journey of discovery as it was [sic] a scientific journey” during which he encountered “a human tapestry as rich and intriguing as the complex faunal assemblages of birds, monkeys, butterflies, and fish” (34-35, 33). Often relying on Malays for food and shelter as well as help with collecting specimens, Wallace appreciated the aid and kindness he received from his frequent hosts. Yet, while passages in *The Malay Archipelago* dwell on the relative poverty he observed among his hosts, they do not reveal any desire on Wallace’s part to alter the political organization of the colonial
government. Wallace’s masterwork did ultimately inspire calls for social and economic change, particularly in terms of land nationalization—but such agitation for change would come from Wallace and others of like mind only once he had returned to English society. The ultimate result of his time in the Malay Archipelago, it seems, was his partial realization of the problematic nature of the term “civilisation.” In what was certainly not an unprecedented intellectual move, in other words, Wallace ultimately used the “simplicity” and “happiness” he saw in Malay society to criticize capitalism and, more specifically, private ownership of land in Victorian society back home (Hampson 77). Rather than criticizing the larger project of colonialism, Wallace insisted that the economic problems he saw in the Malay Archipelago were caused by free trade allowed under current conditions and actually endorsed the older and even more oppressive Dutch system of governmental monopolies. For Wallace, then, his startling observations of happiness and even efficiency in Malay culture still led him to realizations only about his own culture without altering his firm belief in the larger imperial project.

An Uneasy Region: Political Instability and Religious Tensions

The work of Sclater and Wallace far anticipated modern geology’s eventual realization of the system of tectonic plates that underlie the region and explain the disparate populations. As modern geologists remind us, including Winchester in his account of the explosion of the island of Krakatoa in 1883, the islands of Southeast Asia lie along the most seismically dangerous fault in the world—a fact that the catastrophic South Asian tsunamis of 2004 once again brought home. But their scientifically developed boundaries and the faults that geologists have now identified beneath these
islands only begin to encapsulate the instability of the region. For more than five centuries, it has been equally unstable in political and cultural terms since the arrival of Dutch, Portuguese, and British traders during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. And it was in this world of conflicting imperial interests and mosaic of “others” that Joseph Conrad spent the vast majority of his time at sea.

Much like the setting of his most famous work, the Africa of *Heart of Darkness*, the islands of the Malay Archipelago during Conrad’s time were besieged by the imperial ambitions of a number of European countries, nations both in competition with each other and in conflict with the original inhabitants of the islands. As early as the late sixteenth century, Dutch and English traders had begun to challenge the Portuguese dominance of the Archipelago that dated from the fifteenth century. Throughout the seventeenth century, individual Dutch traders were able to negotiate economic alliances with a number of local leaders, and the broader decision of the Dutch government to establish the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie

in 1602, a company that would “act in cooperative concert, and as a monopoly, in all trading matters” in the region, helped Dutch influence continue to rise (Winchester 29). At the same time, though, as Winchester notes, “the easygoing arrogance of the visiting Christian Dutch sat uneasily with the rigid formalisms of Islamic belief” among the locals (31), demonstrating that, beyond the political and cultural conflicts developing in the region, lay the inescapable opposition between the already Islamicized population and the Christian imperialists

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30 The Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC) governed much of the West Indies from 1602 until 1799. Officially beholden to the Dutch government but also among the first joint-stock companies in the world, the VOC also began the practice of delivering goods not just between the East Indies and Europe but also *among* islands in the area (what became known as “country trading”) (Winchester 29-31). And it was this practice of country trading in which Conrad participated during his time in the Malay Archipelago—and during which he would meet the real-life inspirations of a number of his characters, including Kaspar Almayer.
(though, admittedly, the Dutch and British in the region were focused more on economic expansion than religious conversion). The history of the Malay Archipelago, at least from the first appearance of Western traders through the final decades of the nineteenth century, reveals a world where alliances were as unstable as the earth that lay beneath them, where Christians and Muslims harbored a tacit mistrust of each other. Perhaps the most explosive example of this conflict occurred between 1883 and 1888 in the western region of the island of Java. The unrest began in the aftermath of the catastrophic eruption of Krakatoa, as two assassination attempts were made against Dutch soldiers, one of them fatal (Winchester 317-19). It finally reached its zenith in a rebellion that lasted only a few hours on July 9, 1888. Despite its brevity, Winchester notes its larger importance to the history of the region:

The Banten Peasants’ Revolt, as the episode is now generally known, is thought by many today to be a turning point in the region’s colonial history [. . . .] There had been many small rebellions in Java over the years; but what happened in Banten had a significance that transcended many of the other outbreaks of violence and hostility. (319)

What was this greater significance? In Winchester’s eyes, it was the undeniable religious antagonism within the rebellion, as it “marked a period when Islam had become fully entwined with the local political developments of the day” (320). Such troubling events and trends, then, were not isolated to western Java but would have cast a more general air of volatility over much of the Archipelago. It is this uncertainty and instability, in part, that underlies the broken selves of Conrad’s early fiction.

31 While religious difference does not occupy a large role in Almayer’s Folly, aside from Almayer’s obvious envy of the more successful Arab traders, the animosity between Christians and Moslems lies at the heart of the agonistic world of An Outcast of the Islands, as I will discuss below.

32 Winchester goes on to offer a brief but compelling account of how Muslims from the Archipelago would be exposed to Arabized Islam, which viewed Christians largely as enemies, during their pilgrimages and then return to their homes with a more antagonistic approach to the European Christians among them. See pgs. 326-334 for a more thorough and subtle account of this argument.
Meeting Almayer: Conrad’s A Personal Record

Though, as Robert Hampson observes, Joseph Conrad spent a significant amount of his career creating works of fiction that revisited his time in the East, Conrad’s time there as a seaman was relatively brief. He first encountered the Malay Archipelago in March 1883 as the “second mate of the barque Palestine” (6). This first visit was both chaotic and brief, as the Palestine caught fire off Sumatra, forcing the crew to abandon ship. As required by law following the loss of a ship, Conrad appeared before a Marine Court of Inquiry in Singapore and then departed in mid-April to return to London, having spent barely a month in the East (Hampson 6).33 His second visit to the region began in 1887 as first mate of the Highland Forest, but it is Conrad’s time spent on the Vidar in 1888-89 that holds the greatest significance to his Malay fiction (Hampson 8). For it was during this crucial period that Conrad met Charles William Olmeijer, the direct model for his first novel’s central figure, Kaspar Almayer. Conrad made four trips aboard the Vidar, which means that he could have spent no more than twelve days in Olmeijer’s presence (Sherry 30). Given this brief time together, it seems clear that Conrad would have been unable to attain full knowledge of Olmeijer’s past.34 Yet, as we see both in his first novel and in the lengthy section he devotes to “Almayer” in his 1912 autobiography A Personal Record.

33Such a hearing would certainly have been a mere formality for Conrad, but a similar hearing following a much more infamous sinking, that of the Patna in Conrad’s novel Lord Jim, begins the downward spiral of one of the novelist’s most famous characters.

34Our knowledge of the life of Charles William Olmeijer is rather limited, but we do know that he was a trader in Tanjung Redeb, a settlement in eastern Borneo, whom Conrad met in 1887 (Hampson 15-16). Hampson also summarizes Watt’s description of Olmeijer in his Cambridge Edition of Almayer’s Folly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994): “the historical Olmeijer was of mixed Dutch and Malay ancestry; he was a respected and successful trader on the Pantai River; and he died back home in Sourabaya in 1900—five years after Almayer’s death in Almayer’s Folly” (Hampson 195n). The historical Olmeijer, then, was already a Dutch-Malay hybrid at birth, one who exercised at least some control over his own world, unlike his fictional counterpart.
Record, the force of Conrad’s imagination and his intent to heighten the sense of Almayer as a hopeless victim of colonial circumstance and failed imperial dreams outweighed this apparent lack of biographical knowledge. Unlike Swettenham and Clifford, whose extended stays gave them greater knowledge of the region’s customs, Conrad carried a much vaguer sense of the challenges and problems that lay just beneath the surface of official imperial dealings. Indeed, as is evident in A Personal Record, written nearly two decades later, it was the larger symbolic possibilities of his brief acquaintance with Olmeijer that ultimately compelled him to create his first novel.

In Chapter 4 of A Personal Record, Conrad turns away from the chronological “story of his life,” as it were, to talk in detail about the man at the center of Almayer’s Folly, a manuscript begun in 1889 that followed Conrad in his final years as a seaman to the South Pacific as well as to the Congo and back. Insisting that, during these years of travel, the novel “was never dismissed from my mind, even when the hope of ever finishing it was very faint,” Conrad offers a thorough description of his initial glimpse of the real-life inspiration of Almayer, Charles William Olmeijer.

[I]t was in the middle of a shuddering yawn that I caught sight of Almayer. He was moving across a patch of burnt grass, a blurred, shadowy shape with the blurred bulk of a house behind him, a low house of mats, bamboos, and palm-leaves with a high-pitched roof of grass. He stepped upon the jetty. He was clad simply in flapping pyjamas of cretonne pattern (enormous flowers with yellow petals on a disagreeable blue ground) and a thin cotton singlet with short sleeves. His arms, bare to the elbow, were crossed on his chest. His black hair looked as if it had not been cut for a very long time [. . .] (76)

This is a fascinating and telling glimpse, even though Conrad composed it more than a decade after completing the novel and more than two decades after this original meeting. Conrad initially portrays Almayer as someone decidedly incongruous and difficult to fix,
a man equally “blurred” and “shadowy”—and seemingly out of place. While the specific physical details of Conrad’s initial glimpse of Olmeijer do not necessarily affect his portrayal of Almayer, the sense of a man lost within the world he inhabits, as well as the insubstantiality of “a blurred, shadowy shape with the blurred bulk of a house behind him” (the latter a nod to the house actually deemed “Almayer’s Folly” in Conrad’s tale) certainly do echo Conrad’s first novel. In addition, the narrator’s intense focus here on Almayer’s disheveled appearance suggests the hybridity that dooms his fictional counterpart—clad in dingy pyjamas, a curious but blatant relic of “civilization,” Almayer’s wild and uncut hair suggests a savagery within him as well.

As Conrad continues his account of Olmeijer, his language takes on surprising echoes of Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* in suggesting that Olmeijer, up until this moment in Conrad’s life, has been widely discussed and even “constructed” for Conrad by the opinions of countless others:

> I had heard of him at Singapore; I had heard of him on board; I had heard of him early in the morning and late at night; I had heard of him at tiffin and at dinner; I had heard of him in a place called Poulo Laut from a half-caste gentleman there. [. . .] I had heard of him in a place called Dongola [. . .] It was really impossible on board that ship to get away definitely from Almayer. (PR, 76-77)

Well before he explored Marlow’s attempts to construct Kurtz from the opinions of a number of dubious imperialists in the Congo in *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad seems to infuse Olmeijer with a renown that enhances his symbolic value. For, given Conrad’s insistent use of the phrase “I had heard of him,” Almayer/Olmeijer becomes not simply another European in a colonial “wilderness” but one whose fascinating blend of grandiose dreams and disillusioned failures has apparently made him *the* topic of conversation throughout the region. In a process oddly reminiscent of Almayer’s attempts
to elevate his own importance within Conrad’s novel, Conrad uses this central portion of his autobiography to retroactively confirm the essential symbolism of his first novel’s eponymous figure.

At the heart of Almayer’s symbolic importance in A Personal Record lie his fear and mistrust of both objects and beings from the European world to which he has so long dreamed of returning—talismans of the presumably unhybridized world of which he has never been a part and that he has never even seen. Indeed, what marks Almayer throughout this episode are his rapid changes between an instinctive mistrust of those from the “outside” (Europe here, ironically) and the callous disillusionment of a hardened colonialist. At the same time, Conrad’s narrative of this encounter shows similarly paradoxical tendencies, in many moments infantilizing Almayer for his insecurity and fright yet ultimately honoring him at the chapter’s close. The impetus for Conrad’s first conversation with Almayer is a single pony that Conrad’s ship has carried thousands of miles to be delivered to him. In Conrad’s memory, Almayer speaks “in the accents of a man accustomed to the buffets of evil fortune”; assured by Conrad that his pony has arrived, Almayer confronts him with “incredulous and melancholy eyes,” with Conrad adding, “This pathetic mistrust in the favourable issue of any sort of affair touched me deeply” (PR 78). Yet, for all of his anguish over the delivery of the pony, which quickly escapes to the interior of the island, Almayer takes no action to pursue the animal, with Conrad relating that Almayer, “plunged in abstracted thought, did not seem to want that pony any more” (82). Later, in an image nearly as iconic as the blurred shape emerging from the jungle that begins this encounter, Conrad explains how, later that morning, he observed to Almayer, “you haven’t started on your letters yet” (84). For, in addition to
delivering the rather incongruous and extravagant pony, Conrad’s ship has brought along a more mundane parcel—his mail. Almayer has clutched these letters throughout the morning, never opening them but also never setting them down. “I shall never forget that man, afraid of his letters,” Conrad affirms (85). Written more than twenty years after Conrad’s time in the Malay Archipelago, much of this passage still clings to the initial fascination of the younger Conrad, one who was clearly struck by the incongruities of Almayer’s existence but who could not have had time to learn enough from Almayer to account fully for his odd behavior. Years of travel and numerous encounters with other troubled imperialists throughout the world would ultimately fill this gap in knowledge, to great and powerful effect. Still, though this passage in his 1912 autobiography is more suggestive than enlightening, it does offer us a glimpse of that Conrad of 1887 who, two years later, began a six-year process that eventually led to his first published novel.

“Books may be written in all sorts of places,” Conrad announces in the opening sentence of A Personal Record (19), and the extraordinary survival of the manuscript of Almayer’s Folly that lies at the heart of the autobiography’s narrative is certainly testament to that. As Ian Watt records, the developing manuscript, begun and completed in London, accompanied Conrad on his various adventures between 1889 and 1894: “to Australia (twice), to the Ukraine (twice), and to Belgium, Switzerland, and France”—not to mention the author’s harrowing experience in the Congo (AF, xxvii). Chapter 4 (of twelve) was complete by the middle of 1890 and Chapter 8 by late 1891, but Conrad did not report the “death” of Kaspar Almayer (and, thus, the completion of this first novel) until April 24, 1894, in a letter to his friend Marguerite Podarowska (AF, xxviii; CL,
What this prolonged and often interrupted writing process reveals is that, at least until the end of his sea career in 1894, Conrad, a man now in his late thirties, remained uncertain about his ability to make such a drastic change as to become a sedentary author after years of adventures at sea. This doubt also led to an attempt by Conrad to distance himself from his first novel, to feign that this product of five years of his life could rise or fall. This is apparent in Conrad’s comment in a July 1894 letter to Maria Podarowska, as he waited to hear the publishing fate of his first novel, “To be completely frank, I don’t feel any interest in the fate of Almayer’s Folly. It is finished. Besides, it could in any case be only an inconsequential episode in my life” (Letters I: 161). Nine months later, after a number of anxious letters from Conrad to his publisher, Almayer’s Folly launched his career.

Almayer’s Folly primarily narrates the events of only three days with occasional (and crucial) flashbacks to earlier times in the lives of its characters. Born to Dutch parents in the Malay Archipelago and raised on his father’s government salary and his mother’s tales of the “lost glories of Amsterdam” (6), Kaspar Almayer becomes the protégé of a powerful white trader named Tom Lingard. Lingard, primarily for his own reasons, coerces Almayer into marrying a Malay woman whom Lingard once rescued from pirates and agreeing to act as Lingard’s agent on the island of Sambir. Believing that he can amass great wealth comparable to Lingard by discovering a gold mine in the

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Unfortunately, we can only make educated guesses as to why Conrad would have taken the raw material of this encounter and transformed it into the novel that launched his career as a writer. This passage certainly contains a measure of feigned indifference, of lowering expectations in the quiet fear of Almayer’s Folly being rejected. Yet it is not difficult to imagine Conrad at the very least not discounting the possibility of returning to the sea. In fact, during July 1894, the stress of Conrad’s life, and more particularly of trying to get his first novel published, caused an acute case of illness and depression, one that he no doubt associated with the uncertainty surrounding his life. Conrad’s actions through the remainder of the year showed a similar pattern of following two different tracks: even as he continued to inquire about possible positions aboard ships, Conrad began the initial manuscript of what would become his second novel, An Outcast of the Islands, while seeking hydrotherapy in Champel, France, in August.
interior of Sambir, Almayer also hopes to move permanently to Europe with his daughter Nina, leaving his hated Malay wife behind. However, Almayer’s plan depends largely on a Malay youth named Dain Maroola and his knowledge of the mine’s location. But Dain’s love affair with Nina eventually leads to their elopement near the novel’s conclusion, a devastating event that, while reluctantly sanctioned by Almayer, hastens his demise. Having failed to realize his dreams and having been abandoned by his wife and daughter, Almayer burns down his house and begins an opium addiction that swiftly leads to his death. Yet, while Almayer serves as the novel’s protagonist, a host of non-European characters affect the action as well. The Malay Rajah Lakamba and his advisor Babalatchi actively pursue their own agenda, including efforts to discover Dain’s secret for themselves. In addition, Almayer’s hopes of controlling the trade market of Sambir quickly fail due to intense competition from the Arab trader Abdulla as well as Chinese traders. And all of these figures seek to curry and maintain the favor of the Dutch authorities who maintain tacit control over the region despite their largely hands-off approach. Thus, each of these characters must understand and negotiate a complex economic and political environment created by both old and new rivalries in Sambir.

In the Shadow of the “King”: Almayer’s Dreams and the Myth of Lingard

Much like Kurtz in Heart of Darkness, Tom Lingard, Almayer’s benefactor, plays a crucial role in Conrad’s first novel despite remaining largely absent from its action. This is due not only to his direct role in having created the disastrous marriage of the Almayers and his gift of a house and warehouses to Almayer but also to his status as the ideal white man and imperialist in the eyes of his ill-fated protégé. The son of an
insignificant bureaucrat who remains largely invisible within the warehouse of the great financier Hudig, Almayer is essentially rescued by Lingard from this mundane world and introduced to the world of adventure. In contrast to Hudig, a successful yet unheroic figure who waits in his office to receive the adventurers of the region, Lingard is a man apparently worthy of the mythology that has been created for him. But Lingard’s status as his personal savior keeps Almayer from engaging in a more objective assessment of the realities of Lingard’s life and his hero’s relatively short-lived ability to manipulate space for his own purposes. Almayer’s belief in the myth of Lingard in part defines his sense of what it means to be a white man in the colonial world, and both share a dream of amassing enough wealth to move to Europe permanently. But the more fundamental—and even more destructive—illusion that Almayer carries is an assumption that white men enjoy special advantages in their relationship with space that others, including the Malays and Arabs with whom Almayer must eventually compete, do not. And a crucial (and equally flawed) corollary to this assumption is Almayer’s expectation that, not unlike Hudig, he can build his own estate, including the infamous house deemed “Almayer’s Folly,” and wait for his riches to practically walk through his door.

At the heart of this central illusion of Almayer’s beliefs lies the crucial impact of what might be called foundational or even originary structures in Almayer’s life, because they play pivotal roles in shaping his unrealistic expectations for the “white man’s” control over colonial spaces. Both of these buildings—the “parental bungalow” where Almayer spends his adolescence and the mercantile warehouse in Macassar where he begins his career—represent much more than just space to him, as they come to define what it means to be both successful and white in the Malay Archipelago. And it is
Almayer’s utter failure to achieve this type of success—along with his inability to deal
with that failure—that drives his final ruin. While the narrative does not dwell on the
“parental bungalow” of Almayer’s early life, it makes clear that it comes to symbolize the
mediocrity and exile in which his own father has become trapped. Describing Almayer’s
arrival in the city of Macassar, Conrad’s narrator announces,

[It] began a new existence for the son of a subordinate government official
employed on the staff of the Botanical Gardens in Buitenzorg—as glad, no
doubt, to place his son in such a firm as was the young man himself to
leave the poisonous shores of Java, and the meagre comforts of the
parental bungalow [. . .] (6)

While Conrad’s words are few, the impression of the central space of Almayer’s
adolescence nonetheless emerges. Forced to live on the “meagre” salary of a minor
governmental employee, the Almayers could only afford a bungalow that undoubtedly
became a limited space dominated by his father’s grumbling over “the stupidity of native
gardeners” and, more importantly, his mother’s bemoaning of the “lost glories of
Amsterdam where she had been brought up” (6). It is a place pervaded by a sense of
bitter disappointment and of unfulfilled dreams. It is no wonder, then, that Almayer finds
himself transfixed by Macassar, a city “teeming with life and commerce” that holds the
promise of “money and adventure” for those Europeans daring enough to try (7). But
Almayer’s desire to become such an adventurer is not enough, and he soon finds himself
only a menial employee in the “lofty and cool warehouses” controlled by Hudig, a Dutch
financier. In this expansive space, the goods are not the only objects carefully controlled,
for the hierarchy of the place seeks to tell an unambiguous story of race and power. Yet,
as becomes quickly evident, no such story exists, since the white Almayer is forced to
begin in a low-level position that finds him counting Hudig’s money alongside other
“Chinamen,” who are supervised by “Mr Vinck; the cashier; the genius presiding in the place — the right hand of the Master” (7). Almayer’s worktable also lies close to Hudig’s office, a noisy room frequently visited by white adventurers and traders of the region and guarded by a Malay in traditional dress. Foreshadowing Almayer’s inability to penetrate the important spaces of his world, he can only count the money earned by the great white men who pass by on their way to meet Hudig. Marginalized as though he were not of European descent, Almayer remains with the Chinamen and Malays, on the outside looking into the world of white men. Yet, instead of resenting the arbitrary way in which Hudig invalidates his whiteness, Almayer, having escaped the mundane and “meagre” existence of his parents’ bungalow, develops an intense case of hero worship for these men who exercise (or at least who seem to exercise) such absolute control over their world.

Even before he first glimpses the legendary Tom Lingard, the “King of the Sea,” Almayer has already imbibed a number of mythic stories about him, narratives that offer narrow and distorted visions that Almayer accepts as fact and that ultimately dominate his worldview. Perhaps the most famous of these tales describes Lingard’s blend of courage and magnanimity in facing down a band of Sulu pirates and rescuing a young girl from their captivity (though neither Almayer nor Lingard realize that this girl, the future Mrs. Almayer, was actually a willing passenger among the Sulus). And there are also the breathless explanations that “Captain Lingard has lots of money [. . . .] lots of money; more than Hudig!” (8). But beyond his courage and his enormous wealth—more or less expected attributes of great adventurers in both the art of imperial fiction and the reality of colonialism—Lingard’s greatness, especially in Almayer’s estimation, arises
directly from his ability to manipulate space for his own ends, since, as Mr. Vinck explains “in an explanatory whisper; — ‘You know; he has discovered a river” (8).

Conrad’s narrator elaborates,

That was it! He had discovered a river! That was the fact placing old Lingard so much above the common crowd of sea going adventurers who traded with Hudig [. . . .] Into that river whose entrances himself only knew, Lingard used to take his assorted cargo [. . .] Many tried to follow him and find that land of plenty [. . . but] for many years the green and peaceful looking islands guarding the entrances to the promised land, kept their secret with all the merciless serenity of tropical nature. (8-9)

Though Hudig is able to assert control over the workers within his warehouse and at least some influence over the white men who visit him, Lingard actively wields his power over every element of his world. Having discovered a “secret” entrance to what comes to be called “his” river, Lingard remains the only white man who can find this river, even as countless others try and fail to follow him and to share in his secret. And, even more importantly, the narrative suggests that “tropical nature” itself, now that Lingard has essentially duped it, aids him in concealing his “secret.” Thus, it comes as little surprise that Lingard instantly becomes Almayer’s hero or that Almayer, overhearing a shouting match between Hudig and Lingard, would believe that “it sounded like a quarrel of Titans: — a battle of the gods” (9). A year later, Lingard suddenly chooses Almayer to be his protégé, rescuing him from the ignominy of his position and giving him hope that he might one day measure up to the standard of this great white adventurer, this “King of the Sea” (though we ultimately learn that Lingard chooses Almayer for his own selfish reasons). Within the narrative, though, Almayer’s flashback soon ends and we see him once again in the stagnant and decrepit reality of Sambir, still cut off from power and the
treasure that he seeks—and agonizing over his inability to live up to the story of the great white men of Macassar.

Though Almayer’s belief in the myth of Lingard does little to help him in his attempt to dominate the trade of Sambir, his personal foibles are certainly not the only obstacles he faces. While there is a sense, even beyond the myth, that Lingard actually enjoyed certain economic and political advantages due to his “discovery” of the Pantai River, these quickly vanish shortly after Almayer’s arrival. In addition to his geographical savvy, Lingard’s success depends largely on his ties to a Malay rajah who is still in power when Almayer comes to Sambir. In the meantime, though, Lakamba, the future rajah, has already formed an alliance with Syed Abdulla, a powerful Arab trader. Lakamba does so because Lingard no longer holds a strategic advantage since the Arabs have also “discovered” the river and established a trading post in Sambir; and, as the narrator tells us, “where [the Arabs] traded they would be masters and suffer no rival” (20). Almayer, perhaps overly confident in the rajah’s protection and with a newly built house and warehouses ready for trade, makes no such maneuvers. Thus, when the old rajah dies, Lakamba and Abdulla are perfectly positioned . . . and Almayer is left with little chance of success:

Lakamba reigned in his stead now, having been well served by his Arab friends with the Dutch authorities. Syed Abdulla was the great man and trader of the Pantai. Almayer lay ruined and helpless under the close meshed net of their intrigues owing his life only to his supposed knowledge of Lingard’s valuable secret. (20-21)

While this sequence of events seems to seal Almayer’s fate, the fluidity of the political situation in Sambir ultimately affords the Dutchman two more opportunities to form a crucial alliance with either Lakamba or Abdulla. Almayer’s refusal to embrace either,
however, does not depend on political considerations. When Babalatchi encourages Mrs. Almayer to propose an alliance with Lakamba, Almayer rejects the offer primarily because of his severe anger and loathing for his Malay wife. Overwhelmed by his hatred for the messenger, he never takes even a moment to ponder her message. A short time later, when Abdulla proposes an alliance based on Nina becoming his son Reshid’s “favorite wife” (one of the four he is allowed to have), Almayer barely manages to control his rage before politely declining. He does so partly because of his ambition to have Nina marry a white man (in Europe, if his plan succeeds) and partly because he abhors the idea of Nina becoming one among many wives. In other words, his rejection is fueled by his own prejudices and ambitions but also by his concern for his only daughter’s happiness. Once these final chances are missed, Almayer abandons the political realm that he cannot understand or control, as well as the spaces occupied by his political adversaries, and rarely leaves his home. As he does so, Almayer turns inward and seeks to construct a world where he can still fulfill the myth of Lingard, an existence halfway between dreams and reality that increasingly drives him to an obsession with landscape and a growing disregard for the humans who occupy it. Eventually, after his surprising and self-effacing choice to aid Nina in her escape with Dain, Almayer destroys the house Lingard built for him and lives out his final days dwelling in the world of his illusions inside the house that serves as a brutal reminder of his greatest illusion, “Almayer’s Folly” itself.

A Retreat into Illusions: Almayer’s Failing Narratives of Space
While the events of Almayer’s life unfold and his political ineptitude becomes clear, the narrative steadily reveals the growing and ultimately enormous cost of Almayer’s failure to control space: his tortured attempts to connect with the space around him and his declining grasp of and interest in reality. Almayer is introduced on the first page, standing on the verandah of his “new, but already decaying house,” “that last failure of his life” (5). Lost in the first of what will be myriad dreams of the “splendid future,” Almayer’s attention is suddenly captured by a log floating down the Pantai River. At first only slightly distracted from his dream of becoming prosperous enough to rescue Nina from this life and live out his days in Europe, Almayer quickly finds himself mesmerized by the singular image of this drifting log, “rolling slowly over, raising upwards a long, denuded branch, like a hand lifted in mute appeal to heaven against the river’s brutal and unnecessary violence” (6). This is only the first of several crucial moments in the novel’s first third where the narrative explores Almayer’s desire and willingness to transfer his frustrations, both conscious and unconscious, onto the objects of his Malay world. It is, on one level, an absurd moment—a Dutchman with dreams of grandeur anxiously wishing a log a safe journey down a flooded river—but it also represents convincing proof of the desperation that the failure of Almayer’s dreams has produced. Just as “Almayer’s quickened fancy distance[s] the tree on its imaginary voyage” (6), his memory suddenly travels back to the noise and bustle of Hudig’s warehouse twenty years earlier. Only a few pages later, we learn that Almayer’s initial conversation with Lingard concerning the gold mine instantly inspired the young man, “in a flash of dazzling light,” to dream of “his ships, his warehouses, his merchandise…and crowning all, in the far future, gleamed like a fairy palace the big
mansion in Amsterdam[,] that earthly paradise of his dreams” (10). In moments of time separated by nearly two decades, then, Almayer transfers his dream onto and transforms his dream into both a tree (a natural object) and a mansion (a manufactured object). Through this blending of past and present space, Conrad’s narrative subtly points to the beginnings of Almayer’s sense of alienation from the human world he inhabits, an impression that continues to drive his growing obsession with landscape in the novel’s present.

Later in the narrative, a scene that features a group of Europeans deeming a house that Almayer has built in support of his imperial dreams “Almayer’s Folly” demonstrates just how intertwined Almayer’s dreams have become with the structures around him. Welcoming a group of visiting Dutch officers into a “new house for the use of the future engineers, agents or settlers of the new Company” (26), Almayer shamelessly announces his grandiose plans to the gathering. Emphasizing his alienation, especially from members of his own “race,” the narrative relates how Almayer, “excited by the sight of European faces, by the sound of European voices, opened his heart before the sympathising strangers, unaware of the amusement the recital of his many misfortunes caused to those future admirals” (29). The Europeans humor their host during their tour of the house but, as the narrative emphasizes, deem this structure “Almayer’s Folly” only moments after leaving Almayer behind. While this moment is fascinating by itself, once again demonstrating Almayer’s delusions of grandeur, the text makes clear a few pages earlier that his dreams have at least some basis in reality. For it is the promise symbolized
by “the establishment of the British Borneo Co.”\textsuperscript{36} (26), with its attendant hope and promise, that directly inspires him to construct his “folly.” Unfortunately, unlike its real-life counterpart, this new and exciting Company swiftly decides to abandon its claim to the region, leaving Almayer with yet another unrealized dream. Having learned early in his life that the defining attribute of a white man is his ability to define and control his own space—most indelibly epitomized by Hudig’s warehouse in Macassar and Lingard’s “discovery” of the river—Almayer once again fails to achieve such power, though this time his failure occurs because of historical forces that he is powerless to stop.

Regardless, this titular symbol of Conrad’s first novel remains a haunting presence to Almayer as his life spirals downward, and his masochism drives his decision to burn down not “Almayer’s Folly” but his old house, the one Lingard built for him, after Nina’s departure in order to permanently separate himself from the dreams of the past. But he allows his “folly,” the grandest symbol of his shame and failure, to stand, ultimately dying within its walls.

As the novel’s second half begins, Almayer’s ability to control his environment or its meaning is clearly slipping away, exacerbating his sense that his world is a meaningless space and precipitating his subsequent crisis in self-definition. Almayer wakes the morning after the storm to a landscape that seems devoid of human activity or sound. Virtually a fulfillment in extremis of Almayer’s increasing focus on landscape and indifference toward humans, this situation is nevertheless severely troubling to him. After beginning the chapter with an extended description of the landscape and its deserted houses, Conrad’s narrator relates how Almayer wakes, “wondering vaguely at the

\textsuperscript{36}Conrad likely had in mind the British North Borneo Company (originally the British North Borneo Provisional Association Ltd.), which was established in August 1881 to administer the northern region of Borneo (now Sabah). It continued such administration until 1946.
absence of life” in the midst of “the big room opening on the verandah which he called his sitting room, whenever, in the company of white men, he wished to assert his claims to the commonplace decencies of civilization” (69). Almayer wakes, that is, in perhaps the only space whose meaning he still controls, and yet we learn that this control is tenuous at best, since “Mrs. Almayer in her savage moods, when excited by the reminiscences of the piratical period of her life, had torn off the curtains to make sarongs for the slave girls and had burnt the showy furniture piecemeal to cook the family rice” (69). Even as he clings to what seems to be his final refuge in the midst of an increasingly uncontrollable space, Almayer’s “sitting room” primarily represents another story that has ceased to be true, though he cannot yet accept that reality.

In a crucial scene during which Almayer wakes to discover that his wife and daughter have stolen away in the night, Conrad’s narrator explores Almayer’s distorted, confused interiority, in the process fully capturing the volatile balance between dreams and reality that dominates this final crisis of his life. Initially, before Almayer is woken by a young Malay woman named Taminah, the narrator’s description evocatively paints the chaos of the room and of Almayer’s mind with the same stroke. “Almayer, huddled up in the chair, one of his arms hanging down, the other thrown across the lower part of his face as if to ward off an invisible enemy, his legs stretched straight out, slept heavily. [. . .] At his feet lay the overturned table amongst a wreck of crockery and broken bottles” (118). While the room’s state is clearly the result of Almayer’s drunken violence, it is the narrator’s suggestion of an “invisible enemy” that echoes through the remainder of this scene, which describes a dream of Almayer’s in which his “invisible enemies” are myriad
but intertwined; as the nightmare unfolds, the landscape, countless human faces and voices, and, finally, even *space itself* threaten to engulf him.

[. . .] the heavens had descended upon him like a heavy mantle and trailed in starred folds far under him. Stars above, stars all round him; and from the stars under his feet rose a whisper full of entreaties and tears, and sorrowful faces flitted amongst the clusters of light filling the infinite space below. [. . .] He gasped for breath under the crushing weight of worlds that hung over his aching shoulders. [. . .] And ages passed in the superhuman labour, amidst the rush of circling worlds [. . .] (119)

Offering Almayer’s confused and tormented thoughts within his dream unmediated and without ironic comment, the narrator shows how Almayer’s specific frustrations—with his failure to live up to his mother’s stories and the more specific myth of Lingard, with those who have seemingly aided such failure, and with a place from which he can never escape—grow to cosmic proportions as the mockeries of a few human voices grow into an innumerable chorus and the river and trees and houses become literally “worlds” that weigh him down. Almayer, of course, is no Atlas, but his frenzied dream does further confirm how he has turned away from his unfulfilled dreams to the landscape around him, only to find that his sense of alienation grows even more swiftly.

Shortly before Almayer begins the opium addiction that hastens his death, he willingly helps Dain and Nina escape from Sambir, in the process sacrificing his final hope of fulfilling any of his dreams and essentially sealing his own sad fate. What Conrad offers in his description of Almayer’s first action after Nina’s departure offers a powerful metaphor for his inability to control or make meaning of the space around him. Deciding that his deliberate forgetting of Nina “should be done systematically and in order,” Almayer crawls along the beach on all fours, “eras[ing] carefully with his hand all traces of Nina’s footsteps” (147). In their place, he leaves “small heaps of sand [. . . that form] a
line of miniature graves right down to the water” (147). While clearly referencing Almayer’s impending death, one that has been evident from the novel’s opening page, the “graves” that the narrator describes here also seem to symbolize the individual “deaths” of each subsequent dream that Almayer has created to try to live up to the myth of Lingard and his mother’s “lost glories of Amsterdam.” In the wake of Nina’s departure, as he tries to forget her very existence, Almayer also seeks to erase the memory of his failed imperial dreams, an effort that exposes how Almayer’s only ability to “control” his environment now lies in its destruction. Sifting through the dust and neglect of his office within the original house that Lingard built for him, Almayer at first merely seems to be revisiting and lamenting his long-forgotten hopes. But the narrative indicates how this melancholy soon transforms into something much more violent, triggered by an apparition of Nina as a child that has haunted Almayer for days:

He stood thinking mournfully of his past life till he heard distinctly the clear voice of a child speaking amongst all this wreck, ruin and waste. He started with a great fear in his heart and feverishly began to rake in the papers scattered on the floor, broke the chair into bits, splintered the drawers by banging them against the desk and made a big heap of all that rubbish in one corner of the room— (150)

Moments later, his servant Ali announces, “Master! House burn!” and Almayer’s arson is revealed, obliterating the memory of his hopes for wealth and power as well as every remaining “vestige of Nina’s existence” (150-51). Nature soon aids this obliteration as new grass grows “over the black patch of ground where the old house used to stand” and, with it, any trace of “the dwelling that had sheltered Almayer’s young hopes, his foolish dream of [a] splendid future; his awakening, and his despair” (152). The oblivion into which Almayer subsequently sinks, and his eventual death, further highlight the utter failure of Almayer to adapt to the complex colonial space of Sambir, and such a
conclusion seems to suggest that Europeans in particular might face insurmountable challenges in adapting to this incompletely colonized world.

A “Barrier of Hate”: The Fiction of “Hopeless Diversity” in *An Outcast of the Islands*

In *An Outcast of the Islands*, a novel that features myriad characters of different origins rejecting hybridity, Conrad explodes the imperial romance and offers a bleak picture of a world of struggle and isolation, not just for colonialists but for those whom they try and fail to dominate as well. While *Almayer’s Folly* devotes much of its focus to the final days of Kaspar Almayer and his interaction with Nina, *An Outcast of the Islands* explores the challenge of hybridity from multiple angles and in multiple lives. The eponymous “outcast,” a Dutchman named Peter Willems, clearly occupies the central role, but Conrad’s narrative also spends considerable energy in exploring his imperial benefactor Tom Lingard’s partial confrontation with hybridity, as well as the attempts of Willems’s Malay lover Aissa and the Malay Babalatchi to navigate the same challenge from the “opposite” side. In a novel that Conrad wrote as a “prequel” to *Almayer’s Folly*, we also gain fascinating insight into Almayer as a slightly younger man, one who is ambitious and self-interested but also remarkably doting toward his young Nina. What this broader focus allows, especially in comparison to Conrad’s first novel, is a much

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37 Like many of Conrad’s other novels, *An Outcast of the Islands* transformed from a relatively modest piece into a novel of more than twice the length of *Almayer’s Folly*. Conrad’s earliest conception of *Outcast* was to be entitled *Two Vagabonds* and focus on the parallels between Willems and Babalatchi. While Conrad ultimately altered his title to refer only to Willems, however, Babalatchi still plays a significant role throughout the novel, as we will see.
fuller portrait of the complex and unstable colonial world of the Malay Archipelago. In *A Personal Record*, Conrad declares the earth to be “the abode of conflicting opinions” (90), and his second novel’s relentless exploration of the conflicting personal and political narratives of Europeans, Arabs, and Malays reveals a tense world in which struggle and insecurity rule. In the end, after a seemingly endless cycle of manipulations and betrayals, characters on both sides of the imperial divide, especially Willems, ultimately fall back on old racial stereotypes and cultural fictions. In the process, Conrad offers his most crystalline picture of his belief, at least early in his career, that what he deemed “hopeless diversity” seemed destined to overwhelm any efforts to successfully adapt to the inevitable hybridity generated by colonial endeavor.

While the compressed time frame of *Almayer’s Folly* heightens the sense of tragedy that Conrad gives to his first novel, it also limits our ability to see and to judge Almayer’s actions throughout his life. In other words, while it is largely evident that Almayer has been forced to pursue countless new “stories” to compensate for the failure of the ones he inherited from his parents and from Lingard, we ultimately see only the final story—his failed attempt to interpret himself into the landscape around him. But the extended flashbacks and longer scope of *Outcast* allows us to witness the very moment when Willems “stepped off the straight and narrow path” (in the novel’s opening sentence) and to trace his life through what Heliéna Krenn calls the “ingenious evasions” that he exploits in his struggle to adapt to the challenges of hybridity (68). Further, what becomes particularly evident in Conrad’s narrative as a whole, and in Willems’s actions specifically, is the author’s growing awareness of the problem of hybridity for *all* of his
characters, regardless of their race. Along with this growing recognition of the sweeping nature of this problem comes an increased willingness to offer non-European characters who directly, though unsuccessfully, confront the prospect of hybridity.\textsuperscript{38} In a world where even the meaning of “white” is in dispute and in which political allegiances shift overnight, Conrad’s Malay and European characters cling to the false but absolute distinctions at the heart of the imperial ideologies, with the narrative reaffirming “a barrier of hate” that is reified primarily because of the “hopeless diversity” of the actors on Conrad’s complicated stage (118, 274).

At the heart of the novel’s more direct identification of hybridity as its central problem lies Conrad’s willingness to imbue the character of Willems with beliefs that closely mirror the imperial fiction—to, in a sense, personify Willems as European Imperialism itself. Such personification is evident even in the novel’s initial pages. Speaking of Willems’s rationale for his decision to violate his own ethics in pursuit of his larger goals, the narrator reveals,

> It was going to be a short episode—a sentence in brackets, so to speak—in the flowing tale of his life: a thing of no moment, to be done unwillingly, yet neatly, and to be quickly forgotten. He imagined that he could go on afterwards looking at the sunshine, enjoying the shade, breathing in the perfume of flowers in the small garden before his house. (7)

It is, not surprisingly, this “short episode” of degradation that will endure throughout the remaining years of Willems’s life and consume the “flowing tale of his life.” Willems also delights in the paternalistic control he exercises over his “half-caste” wife and her

\textsuperscript{38}The reasons behind Conrad’s increasingly direct treatment of imperialism and hybridity in his second novel are largely unclear. Still, despite Conrad’s frequent expressions of anguish over his writing (which would continue throughout his career), it is not hard to imagine that the positive critical reception of \textit{Almayer’s Folly}, as well as Conrad’s increasing command of the English language, may have confirmed that this type of story—adventure fiction but with a tragic twist—was something worth continuing to pursue. In addition, just as \textit{Almayer’s Folly} may have been instructive to its readers about the personal dangers of imperialism, perhaps it also allowed Conrad to discover the issue of hybridity that underlay the broader problem of the failure of imperial ideals that he had already exposed in his first novel.
family, the da Souzas (“those degenerate descendants of Portuguese conquerors” in Willems’s mind) (7-8). “It is a fine thing to be a providence, and to be told so on every day of one’s life,” the narrator reports of Willems’s thoughts. “It gives one a feeling of enormously remote superiority” (8). Finally, at the end of this crucial opening paragraph of the novel, we learn of Willems’s essential worldview and self-conception: “They lived now by the grace of his will. This was power. Willems loved it” (8). In the beginning, then, Willems is permeated by imperial ideology, celebrating himself as a “remotely superior” benefactor and also bordering on self-deification while celebrating his own “grace.” He also clearly imagines his life as a story that closely mirrors the larger narrative of imperialism that so thoroughly drives his actions. This passage is ultimately vital not because it offers surprising information—Willems is an imperialist and these are expected attitudes—but because of the conflicted path that he will tread, in moments seeking to announce or to reject his hybridity . . . and ultimately clinging unapologetically to his imperial fiction of virtue and power and “grace.”

Reemerging into white society after a five-week love affair with a Malay woman named Aissa, Willems expresses more clearly his hope to complete his own imperial project of control while also conveying his deep-seated fear of being transformed through the “denationalisation” which Clifford also fears. Pleading with Almayer, who reprimands Willems on Lingard’s behalf for his affair, Willems begs to be made an independent trader, adding, “And then I would have her all to myself away from her people—all to myself—under my own influence—to fashion—to mould—to adore—to soften—to . . . I would be all the world to her!” (72). More than simply relating a fantasy of control, Willems’s words suggest that he wishes not only to physically remove Aissa
from her people but further to wield his own “influence” in attempting to neutralize her hybridity—to remake her in his own civilized (and white) image. Yet, while Willems demonstrates how he still clings to imperial beliefs in moments, his instinctive sense that he, in fact, has no control also emerges. Even before this confrontation with Almayer, the narrator describes how Willems, in a moment of “cruel lucidity,” “had a notion of being lost amongst shapeless things that were dangerous and ghastly” (63). Beyond this palpable but vague sense of disorientation, though, Willems’s thoughts betray a much more powerful and distinct fear, that of not only failing to change Aissa but of actually losing his cultural identity at her hands—of being “denationalized”—in a moment of frenzied emotion.

He sought refuge within his ideas of propriety from the dismal mangroves, from the darkness of the forests and of the heathen souls of the savages that were his masters. . . . Would his ideas ever change so as to agree with her own notions of what was becoming, proper, and respectable? He was really afraid they would, in time. It seemed to him awful. She would never change! This manifestation of her sense of proprieties was another sign of their hopeless diversity; something like another step downwards for him. She was too different from him. He was so civilised! (99, emphasis added)

Bewildered by a world that is vastly unraveling his plan for his life, Willems cannot even make distinctions between the “savages” that oppose his will or the spaces that they inhabit. This is a moment of denial and of blame, as Willems seeks an explanation for his inability to resist Aissa and for the failure of his personal imperial project to dominate her. Rather than acknowledge his own evident corruptibility or face the hybrid realities of his life, Willems opts for the alternative story that most of the novel’s characters, in addition to its narrator, ultimately choose: the fiction of “hopeless diversity” and the choice to accept the absolute categories that they know to be false. Yet, as we shall see, while Willems does eventually settle on “hopeless diversity” as the explanation for his
failed life, he travels a complex road to arrive at that decision, alternatively accepting and rejecting his hybridity in certain moments while still hoping to retain the rights of his “whiteness.”

The first and most complex challenge to Willems’s sense of his self as a powerful white imperialist becomes clear in his first moments in the presence of Aissa. During this initial encounter, Aissa says to Willems, “you are the white trader—the great man of this place” (55). Willems’s response reveals his perilous position between two stories and two worlds, yet hesitant to abandon either out of fear of losing his self or, at the very least, his power: “‘Yes,’ said Willems, holding her eyes with his in a sense of extreme effort, ‘Yes, I am white.’ Then he added, feeling as if he spoke about some other man, ‘But I am the outcast of my people’” (55). Displaying equal portions of self-pity and defiance, Willems seeks to refashion himself not as the great “white trader” but as the even more unique great white *exile* (significantly, he announces himself not as “an” outcast among other outcasts but as “the” outcast of his people, grasping for a measure of uniqueness even in his self-loathing). In the same moment, though, he still unconsciously confirms his whiteness while also apparently trying to intimidate/control Aissa with his intense stare (though Conrad’s words here are, admittedly, a bit nebulous). Even as he affirms his rejection by his “race,” in other words, he cannot keep himself from seeking to dominate, however ineffectual his attempt. Over the following weeks, however, Willems wholly abandons white society and plunges into a five-week love affair with Aissa that temporarily conquers the imperial and racial ideologies that have long formed the foundation of Willems’s self. Willems’s initial words and actions toward Aissa seem to reveal a man intent on overcoming hybridity by rejecting his own whiteness (by
embracing his “outcast” status) and, for lack of a better term, “going native.” Yet, in a novel that will eventually endorse the fiction of “hopeless diversity” as enthusiastically as its central characters do, Willems’s attempt is destined to fail, as becomes evident shortly after he reemerges into white society.

Even as Willems continues to embrace the “idiotic beatitude” (109) of his relationship with Aissa, an attempt on his life by her father Omar reawakens the cultural and racial hates at the heart of imperial ideology—and, just as significantly, Conrad’s narrator exploits the moment to begin a process of embracing the fiction of “hopeless diversity.” But it is not the potential for death that so disturbs Willems—Omar is aged and blind and can easily be repulsed. It is, rather, the stark reminder that he has attempted to live among people he once sought to dominate and whom he will never understand or control:

He was in the grip of horrible fear. [. . .] It was the unreasoning fear of this glimpse into the unknown things, into those motives, impulses, desires he had ignored, but that had lived in the breasts of despised men, close by his side, and were revealed to him for a second, to be hidden again behind the black mists of doubt and deception. It was not death that frightened him: it was the horror of bewildered life where he could understand nothing and nobody round him; where he could guide, control, comprehend nothing and no one—not even himself. (115)

Blinded by self-absorption and his infatuation with Aissa, Willems has failed to recognize just how perilous his life as an outcast is, and this fear only grows as he realizes that Aissa seems to be holding him down to aid her father. Yet, even after Omar is knocked unconscious, Aissa’s betrayal does not lead Willems to reject her but rather to desire even more strongly to carry her away from this space of bewilderment back to a place whose meaning he can control. Her response, conversely, is an insistent belief that she must “put between him and other white men a barrier of hate” (118)—to make him
unacceptable to his “civilization” so that he must remain with her. Finally, in a moment that directly recalls Willems’s fear of learning secrets only to have them “hidden again behind the black mists of doubt and deception,” Aissa flees into the darkness of the night and the forest, and Willems is left to battle “with the shadows, with the darkness, with the silence” (121). In a moment strongly reminiscent of Almayer’s Folly, Willems ostensibly battles with the landscape that has swallowed Aissa up and yet, as we can clearly see, he actually wars with his own powerlessness to exist outside of the civilization that has lent him his core self-narrative, one that continues to fall to pieces around him.

As Conrad’s second novel approaches its conclusion, it swiftly becomes clear that the same bewilderment and confusion that plague Willems’s attempt to maintain his self affect everyone around him, as the words and actions of various characters demonstrate the racial and political confusion that reign. In terms of race, the terms “white” and “English” are co-opted by a number of characters whose claims to either category are tenuous at best. Early in the novel, Leonard da Souza, Willems’s father-in-law, declares, “Do not hurt [Aissa], Mr. Willems. You are a savage. Not at all like we, whites,” apparently excluding Willems from his “we” (25). Yet, only a few moments later, da Souza conspiratorially insists, “Do not be brutal, Mr. Willems. [. . .] It is unbecoming between white men” (26, emphasis added). Willems, then, at least in one character’s opinion, is a nonwhite savage one minute and then magically restored to his “whiteness” in the next—all, in de Souza’s eyes, based on his behavior rather than any intrinsic aspect. Later, Almayer relates to Lingard a frantic episode in which political and racial
confusion combine.\textsuperscript{39} Realizing that Willems has allied himself with Lakamba, a local Malay ruler, Almayer raises the British Union Jack flag for protection.\textsuperscript{40} Moments later, on the opposite shore, Lakamba and Willems raise a Dutch flag and demand that “during all that day every one passing the flagstaff must uncover his head and salaam before the emblem” (138), awkwardly adding a religious overtone to their political ultimatum (and thus mirroring the combustible blend of political and religious tensions that dominated the Malay region during the period). Further, as Almayer relates, one of the members of the crowd is a “Chinaman” named Jim-Eng who refuses to show respect to the Dutch flag. Why? Because Jim-Eng “[s]aid he was an Englishman, and would not take off his hat to any flag but English” (140). Apparently born to Chinese parents in English-held territory (likely the Straits Settlements), Jim-Eng claims to be both English and, as becomes quickly apparent, “white.” “They are only black fellows,” he insists to Almayer, “We white men [. . .] can fight everybody in Sambir” (140). Anticipating Marlow’s relentless exposure of the inadequacy of the black/white binary in \textit{Heart of Darkness}, this passage compellingly demonstrates the baffling realities of race and politics in the Malay world of Conrad’s early fiction. Willems’s struggle to maintain his self, then, difficult enough in the face of the failure of imperial ideology, must also contend with the uncertainty and instability at the heart of every self on both sides of the imperial divide. Such instability also points to the larger picture of Conrad’s second novel—a struggle to

\textsuperscript{39}Hampson explores this episode both for its representation of “hybridised political identities” and for the way in which the confusion about political flags demonstrates the “fluid performance of identity within the shifting pattern of political allegiances of the archipelago” (\textit{Cross-Cultural Encounters}, 111).

\textsuperscript{40}As Hans van Marle points out in his notes to the Oxford World’s Classics Edition of \textit{Outcast}, this is a moment particularly rich in irony, as Almayer is the child of Dutch parents who has no claims to English protection.
survive physically and psychically in the face of hybridity and its inescapable power that threatens to consume all in the agonistic Malay world of *An Outcast of the Islands*.

Finally forced to confront Lingard, the father figure of his life, and to explain himself, Willems once again tries to place the blame on Aissa’s mystical powers over him, but his explanations fall lightly on the deaf ears of Lingard. Employing the hateful invective of the black/white binary that the novel has largely exploded, Willems says of Aissa’s eyes, “Look at them! You can see nothing in them. They are big, menacing—and empty. The eyes of a savage; of a damned mongrel, half-Arab, half-Malay,” before desperately proclaiming, “I am white! All white!” (209). Lingard, who has survived a lesser struggle with hybridity with his self largely intact, responds by essentially attempting to speak Willems and his pitiful claims out of existence.

> *You are my mistake.* I shall hide you here. [. . .] To me you are not Willems, the man I befriended and helped through thick and thin, and thought much of . . . *You are not a human being* that may be destroyed or forgiven. *You are a bitter thought, a something without a body* and that must be hidden . . . *You are my shame.* (212, emphasis added)

Refusing to accept Willems’s passing of the blame for his corrupt acts, Lingard first tries to speak Willems’s humanity, his corporeality, away. Realizing that even his words do not carry such power (for Lingard’s considerable ego remains, despite his own quiet doubts about his superiority), Lingard instead opts to reject Willems’s claims to belong to either side of the imperial divide and to destroy Willems not by announcing his inescapable hybridity but by flatly denying him any identity: “Nothing can help you. Nobody will. You are neither white nor brown. You have no colour as you have no heart” (213). In this final confrontation between the two white men at the center of the novel’s plot, Lingard’s words, in denying Willems even the haunting possibility of hybridity as a
way of preserving his self, directly foreshadow the narrative’s broader rejection of the potential for such a middle ground for identity, in the process transforming the physical barrier of the Wallace Line into a psychological “barrier of hate” between colonizer and colonized and between white and nonwhite.

While Lingard’s words cannot annihilate Willems from his shameful existence, both the landscape and, more significantly, Conrad’s narrative steadily diminish Willems as the novel speeds to its conclusion, revealing in the process Conrad’s recognition of the problem of hybridity, a problem for which he could offer no apparent solution, at least in 1896. In a moment with powerful echoes of the footprints of both Crusoe and Almayer’s daughter Nina, the narrator, after describing Willems’s defiant lack of remorse for his choices, offers a stunning description of Willems’s wandering and feckless existence:

He moved on, and on; ceaseless, unresting, in widening circles, in zigzagging paths that led to no issue; and the marks of his footsteps, pressed deep into the soft mud of the bank, were filled slowly behind him by the percolating water of the rising river, caught the light and shone in a chain of small reflected suns along the broad expanse of black slime, of the dull and quivering mire where he struggled on, objectless, unappeased [. . . .] (251)

Offering a fiercely ironic picture of Willems’s failed imperial ambitions, Conrad’s narrator exposes the nomadic emptiness that remains of Willems’s grandiose dreams. His stepping off the path that was to be a “short episode” in his life has exposed him to a world of insecurity and hybridity for which he was never prepared and from which he cannot escape. He still makes an impact—trailing “small reflected suns” in his footprints on the ugly landscape—but it is to no one’s benefit. Faced with such a fruitless existence, Willems’s defiance does not endure long, and he swiftly turns Aissa out of his house, foreshadowing the narrative’s final affirmation of the irreconcilable distance between
white and nonwhite in the Malay world and, by extension, the imperial theater as a whole.

In the end, Aissa and Willems’s attempts to forge a new fiction for their lives fail, and Conrad’s narrator can only fall back on the reductive and equally insufficient old fictions of hate and difference that underlay imperial ideology. Willems’s dream of escaping the Malay world has finally been eclipsed by Lingard’s refusal to save him, though he is allowed a moment in which, with “a gesture careless and tragic,” he ruefully declares, “I am a lost man” (260). For Aissa, we learn that she had hoped to exact revenge on the white world by co-opting the power of one of its “great” men—only to realize, of course, that Willems was anything but “great”: “She had found a man of their race—and with all their qualities. All whites are alike. But this man’s heart was full of anger against his own people” (255). Both dream of controlling the other, and the disappointment of each leads to a declaration of insurmountable difference between the two “races”: “Those two, surrounded each by the impenetrable wall of their aspirations, were hopelessly alone, out of sight, out of earshot of each other; each the centre of dissimilar and distant horizons; standing each on a different earth, under a different sky” (256, emphasis added). The same author who announced in the preface to *Almayer’s Folly* “there is a bond between us and that humanity so far away” (3) now allows his narrator to ignore any hint of common ground between races in affirming such absolute and irresolvable differences. Only days later, Aissa, whose power Willems doubts to the very end, murders Willems as he attempts to return to civilization with his white wife. Willems’s pitiful existence, then, comes to a merciful end, but both Mrs. Willems and especially Aissa devolve into paralyzing grief in the wake of his death. Thus, the
conclusion of Conrad’s second novel, a work that explores, even more fully than his first, the challenges that hybridity presents to numerous individuals on both sides of the imperial divide, ultimately delivers a tragedy much larger than the sad life of Peter Willems. What Conrad presents is a systematic failure, but on a deeply and destructively personal level, of a grand political and racial system without offering any solace to his readers. Hybridity may have offered a middle ground for identity, but Conrad could not envision a way in which such a possibility could overcome the deeply held racial and cultural beliefs of both colonizers and colonized.

At the beginning of a writing career during which the Malay Archipelago would never fully disappear, Conrad spent much of his first two novels pondering and ultimately identifying the need of his colonialists to find a usable story in the hybrid spaces where imperial efforts continued. Conrad’s portrayal of Almayer in his first novel certainly demonstrates this need, but it remains beyond the consciousness of Almayer himself. An Outcast of the Islands, building on the novel it served as a prequel, makes clear from its opening sentence that Willems understands his life as a narrative, one which he consciously “interrupts,” an action that ultimately seals his dark fate. And, as we have also seen, Conrad’s narrator in Outcast seems to construct the conclusion of his narrative from older stories of difference and division. After failed attempts to write a third novel to join Almayer’s Folly and An Outcast of the Islands and a turn toward the sea in The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’ (1897), Conrad’s creation of Charlie Marlow would take his fiction to a higher level, as many critics have pointed out. Using Marlow, a storyteller with a growing consciousness of the importance of stories to the life of the self—one that likely mirrored Conrad’s own growing sense of the significance of self-narratives—
Conrad created his most defining and enduring picture of the personal price of imperialism and its driving fictions, *Heart of Darkness*. In this work of adventure fiction that appeared just as the new century dawned, Conrad continued to explore the issues of hybridity and identity, but this time through a much more personal lens—his harrowing months in the African Congo—and, in the process, offered a markedly different picture of how colonialists could potentially embrace hybridity in the process.
Chapter 4

“Something…to Live With”:
Marlow’s Sympathy and the “Saving Illusion” in Heart of Darkness

Recognizing the arbitrariness of one’s practices and values threatens one’s faith in them even as it opens up the possibility of genuinely reciprocal cross-cultural understanding with other worlds whose ways of being are no less justified than one’s own.

Paul B. Armstrong, “Reading, Race, and Representing Others”

[G]enuine and thorough comprehension of Otherness is possible only if the self can somehow negate or at least severely bracket the values, assumptions, and ideology of his culture.

Abdul JanMohamed, “The Economy of Manichean Allegory”

We must for dear life make our own counter-realities.

Henry James, Letter to Lucy Clifford

Despite Conrad’s announcement in his “Author’s Note” to Almayer’s Folly, “I am content to sympathise with common mortals no matter where they live” (3),\(^4\) his first two novels reveal the Malay Archipelago as a place where nothing close to sympathy exists and where mutual suspicion and distrust dominate nearly all human interactions. In his third published novel, The Nigger of the Narcissus, a complex mixture of narrative voices alternatively invites and frustrates the idea of sympathy for the ship’s central polarizing figure, James Wait. In fact, it was the introduction of the narrative voice of

\(^4\)In the event, Conrad’s “Author’s Note” was not actually published until 1921, but its proof of Conrad’s sympathetic worldview as his career began remains significant. For a more detailed explanation of Conrad’s composition and the reasons why it did not appear in 1895, see Watt’s introduction to the Cambridge Edition of Almayer’s Folly (1994), xxxviii-xli.
Charlie Marlow in Chapter 5 of *Lord Jim* that finally allowed Conrad to imbue his work with the blend of inescapable cynicism and yet undeniable sympathy that so constantly defines his four Marlovian narratives (*Lord Jim*, “Youth,” *Heart of Darkness*, and *Chance*). In only one of these four, *Heart of Darkness*, does Marlow’s cynicism seem to triumph over his sympathy and even empathy for those he meets, yet a brief reminder of Marlow’s introduction in *Lord Jim* helps to remind us that sympathy is a defining characteristic of Marlow’s life that is also reflected in his narratives. And, as I argue in this chapter, an extended consideration of Marlow’s responses to the various imperialists and Africans he meets on his Congo journey also reveals that such sympathy pervades the narrative of *Heart of Darkness* much more than critics have heretofore recognized.

On the whole, critics agree that Conrad’s invention of Marlow represents a crucial turning point in his writing career by providing a singular narrative voice through which to focus his tales. But they seem to concentrate much less attention on the fact that Marlow’s first significant narrative act is to relate the excruciating trial of Jim for abandoning his ship and the trial’s immediate aftermath. Indeed, after the matter-of-fact introduction of Marlow at the end of Chapter 4, his first words dwell upon his habit of becoming a “guardian angel” to “men with soft spots, with hard spots, with hidden plague spots” who “[loosen] their tongues at the sight of me for their infernal confidences” (25). Though Marlow expresses his puzzlement over why he receives such confidences

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42Biographers trace the invention of Charlie Marlow to Conrad’s initial draft of a story entitled “Tuan Jim” (the precursor to Conrad’s novel) in April or May of 1898, well before his astonishingly swift composition of *Heart of Darkness* began in December 1898. Thus, while *Lord Jim* did not appear until six months after *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow’s first appearance within Conrad’s works occurred in the story of Jim, not Kurtz.

so frequently, his actions in the moments following Jim’s trial—abiding Jim’s threats until he realizes his misunderstanding and essentially taking responsibility for Jim’s survival—suggest that Marlow possesses an instinctive sympathy that he cannot deny (or even explain). And both his behavior in the past and his initial attempts to explain Jim’s behavior aboard the Patna in the present reveal how this sympathy leads to definitive action when faced with desperate individuals, even those whom he has just met—and to a fierce loyalty to them afterwards.

By his own account, Marlow’s initial interest in Jim does not differ greatly from the popular fascination with the Patna scandal and his willingness to publicly answer for it. And, though his efforts to understand the strangely moral behavior of Jim do lead him to surveil his subject on a few occasions outside the courtroom, it seems unlikely that Marlow would have formed such a close friendship with him if not for the misinterpreted remark of his companion, “Look at that wretched cur” (46). Yet something that even Marlow cannot quite explain causes him to bear the menacing threats of Jim long enough for the young man to realize that Marlow was calling a dog a “cur” and not Jim. “I don’t know what in these words, or perhaps just the intonation of that phrase, induced me suddenly to make all possible allowances for him,” Marlow relates. “I ceased to be annoyed at my unexpected predicament” (47). A few pages later, Marlow offers a broader and surprisingly apologetic explanation of his habit of ending up in this sympathetic role.

My weakness consists in not having a discriminating eye for the incidental—for the externals [. . . .] I have met so many men [. . .] met them too with a certain—certain—impact, let us say; like this fellow, for

44 Exiting the courthouse after one day of Jim’s trial, Marlow sees a mangy dog nearby, prompting his remark to another acquaintance. Jim, exiting at the same time, overhears the remark and imagines that it is spoken about him.
instance—and in each case all I could see was merely the human being. A confounded democratic quality of vision which may be better than total blindness, but has been of no advantage to me—I can assure you. (59)

Once he realizes Jim’s mistake, Marlow’s ability to “see” the “human being” behind Jim’s anger and shame leads him to invite Jim to dinner that evening, distracting him from his great embarrassment over this misunderstanding and giving him a chance to tell the story of his infamous behavior to Marlow’s sympathetic ear. On the final day of Jim’s trial, shortly after he is officially stripped of his sailor’s license, Marlow does more than rescue Jim from humiliation—he saves Jim from himself. Insisting that Jim accompany him back to his apartment, Marlow begins writing letters to inquire about possible positions for Jim as the young sailor, who is actually physically shaking in response to the trial, tries to recover control over himself. Jim eventually refuses Marlow’s help after this encounter, but after several years of attempting to establish a new life for himself, Jim accepts Marlow’s help and starts over in a remote region called Patusan. Marlow’s strong loyalty to Jim even leads him to visit Patusan shortly before Jim’s tragic death. From a chance encounter brought about by a simple misunderstanding to the sympathy and nonjudgment generated by Marlow’s “democratic quality of vision” to a lasting and loyal friendship, Marlow displays an exceptional ability to see the “human being” in others, especially those who look like him. But it is only in Heart of Darkness, despite its almost universally silent Africans, that Marlow demonstrates this capacity in dealing with those who are decidedly not “one of us.”

Even before Marlow begins his famous narrative by introducing London as “one of the dark places on the earth,” the frame narrator makes clear that Heart of Darkness
will not merely be the story of one Englishman facing the dark realities of imperialism but a broader examination of the hollowness of the stories that help sustain that imperialism. Providing a brief primer of the imperial ideology (and mythology) being perpetuated by the media and governments of the European imperial powers, the unnamed voice muses on the adventures of “all the men of whom the nation is proud, from Sir Francis Drake to Sir John Franklin, knights all, titled and untitled—the great knights-errant of the sea” (47).45

Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth! [. . .] The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires. (47)

This is a crucial passage that, while echoing the imperial ideology that Marlow will soon call into question, also unapologetically establishes the dual aims and means of imperialism—to “improve” and to subdue, always through use of the “sword” and “often” (though not always) with the “torch” of improvement as well. Conrad allows this glowing view of imperial endeavor to linger for only a moment before Marlow begins to reveal the more complex and troubling reality—that both the torch and the sword are flawed tools driven by at best dubious intentions, especially in a world where the “story” of imperialism is exposed and under constant threat from reality and the competing narratives of those whom imperialism would “civilize” and subdue.

In the opening moments of his tale, Marlow establishes the central pattern of his entire story of Kurtz and European Imperialism in Africa, one that will focus on relating the individual experiences of numerous imperialists while also investigating what self-

45This and subsequent quotations from *Heart of Darkness* refer to Conrad, *Youth and Two Other Stories* (Doubleday, 1926), which is based on the authoritative *Collected Works of Joseph Conrad*. 
narratives they employ—what “stories” they tell themselves—to survive the life- and psyche-threatening circumstances that they face. And in these opening moments, Marlow does this by explaining the experiences of two fictional Romans who were driven to invade the English “darkness” for familiar reasons—glory and gold. As he introduces the figure of the Roman commander, we see for the first time Marlow’s skill in painting an impressionistic picture of the physical environment that the young commander would have faced: “a sea the colour of lead, a sky the colour of smoke [. . . .] Sand-banks, marshes, forests, savages,—precious little to eat fit for a civilized man, nothing but Thames water to drink” (49). But, more importantly, we also discover Marlow’s keen interest in what motivations or beliefs might have allowed him to survive:

Oh, yes—he did it. Did it very well, too, no doubt, and without thinking much about it either, except afterwards to brag of what he had gone through in his time, perhaps. [. . .] And perhaps he was cheered by keeping his eye on a chance of promotion to the fleet at Ravenna by and by, if he had good friends and survived the awful climate. (49-50)

Unlike Marlow’s second Roman example, the young Roman naval commander resists the environment around him through indifference (“without thinking much”) and a lust for glory and promotion that will deliver him out of the darkness. As for the other Roman, “a decent young citizen in a toga—perhaps too much dice, you know—coming out here to mend his fortunes” (50), his motivation is almost solely economic. But his weakness, perhaps foreshadowed by his apparent lack of restraint in his gambling, lies in his inability to protect his psyche from the “utter savagery” around him. Though Marlow’s listeners are not yet aware, their storytelling friend has already revealed the core of the experiences that the Manager and Kurtz, respectively, will face in the African wilderness. But while both of these Romans provide significant metaphorical possibilities in
foreshadowing later figures in Marlow’s tale, the most significant aspect of these brief comments is Marlow’s already marked interest in how “men” face the “darkness”—especially the psychological defenses they evolve and the stories (present or future) they tell themselves in a desperate effort to survive.

Even as Marlow reveals an unmistakable concern for how imperialists deal with their experiences abroad, his view of imperialism itself, particularly the actions of England, is a far cry from any definitive denunciation. Seeking to reassure his audience, and perhaps himself, Marlow insists that two watchwords—“efficiency” and the “idea” behind imperialism—elevate England’s efforts above those of the Romans two millennia ago and of other nations in the present day:

What saves us is efficiency—the devotion to efficiency. [. . .] The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea [. . . .] (50-51)

This moment represents an early demonstration of the war that Marlow wages against himself and his pre-Congo beliefs throughout his tale, for in the same breath he is able to recognize the arbitrary and “not pretty” realities involved in imperial “conquest” while still insisting that such an effort remains redeemable. Such a contradiction dominates his characterization of the lesser imperialists he meets on his journey toward Kurtz. And it also reveals an awestruck disdain in which he acknowledges his astonishment at the stories and methods that they have had to employ to survive while still refusing to let his contempt lead to outright condemnation of their acts. In this regard, Marlow demonstrates an almost clinical approach to assessing and accounting for the extraordinary personages
of the Company, one that echoes the disjointed exclamations of the Company’s doctor during Marlow’s “examination.”

While even a casual reader of *Heart of Darkness* can connect Marlow’s observation that he “was becoming scientifically interesting” (72) during his Congo journey to his earlier encounter with the doctor, this early and awkward scene holds a much greater importance. On one level, of course, it introduces the possibility of madness—for the doctor, for Kurtz, even for Marlow himself—into the tale, and such a possibility also encourages careful doubt in the reliability of Marlow’s words. But it also offers a window on Marlow’s narrative method, as a moment that begins by ridiculing the doctor’s phrenological measurements ends with a haunting thought that clearly stays with Marlow throughout his journey and the tale he tells of it: “the changes take place inside, you know. [. . .] It would be [. . .] interesting for science to watch the mental changes of individuals, on the spot” (58). On many occasions throughout the novel, Marlow will attempt to add levity to his tale by subtly mocking the men he encounters, but these attempts will not keep Marlow from revealing (or discovering) the more important and sober realities of each man’s life and the story that each chooses to believe. We have already seen Marlow’s explicit interest in the use of self-narrative to endure harsh and foreign conditions in his hypothetical accounts of the two Roman conquerors, a focus that likely mirrors his own discovered need for such a narrative during his time in the Congo. In light of this, Marlow’s choice to relate this scene to his audience and specifically to share the doctor’s unrealized ambition for study “on the spot” marks an important revelation. For even a slight step toward such a clinical (and, in his eyes, nonjudgmental) point of view on Marlow’s behalf represents an important first step toward his acceptance
of the need for self-narrative that he will eventually achieve during his interview with the
Intended. Before he can embrace such openness and sympathy, though, Marlow endures
a lengthy period of bitter indifference toward the imperialists he meets on his way to
Kurtz, men facing the same dilemma as Marlow and whose self-narratives alternately
fascinate and disgust Conrad’s famed storyteller.

At the same time, just as the doctor likely holds a number of the racial stereotypes
that underlay the practice of phrenology at the time, Marlow similarly does not embark
on his trip having lived in a vacuum. The time between Marlow’s departure from the
Company’s offices and his arrival at the Outer Station certainly reveals his quiet doubts
about the imperial mission and the “rot” behind it. In addition, though, Marlow’s
thoughts on the African coast and the first Africans he glimpses bring us back both to the
more simplistic world view of the adventure fiction of Haggard (and, to a lesser extent, of
Jules Verne) and, more immediately, to Almayer’s tortured fascination with landscape.
While most of Marlow’s tale focuses on his time in the Congo, where the realities on the
ground constantly challenge the stories behind imperialism, he departs on his adventure
from a city where such imperial fictions were born and where they continue to thrive.
Realizing that he has been represented as a man of almost Kurtzian abilities and talents,
“[s]omething like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle,” Marlow
laments, “There had been a lot of such rot let loose in print and talk just about that time,
and the excellent woman, living right in the rush of all that humbug, got carried off her
feet” (59). Though he undercuts such “humbug” by “hint[ing] that the Company was run
for profit” (59), Marlow remains disconcerted by this encounter. Doubting his ability to
succeed in what he insists represented only a “commonplace affair,” Marlow
foreshadows his primeval descriptions of the African landscape by announcing, “for a second or two, I felt as though, instead of going to the centre of a continent, I were about to set off for the centre of the earth” (60). Marlow, caught in a moment of sincere misgivings, harks back to Verne’s *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864), perhaps the most famous novel by the most prolific teller of adventure stories during Conrad’s youth. As becomes quickly clear, though, Verne’s is not the only adventure fiction on Marlow’s mind, as his initial reactions to Africa echo the simpler world view and racial hierarchy of Haggard’s fiction.

The first challenge to Marlow’s understanding of his surroundings comes as he ponders the African coast along which he travels. Echoing Almayer’s frenzied attempts to “story” his world but with his much calmer and seemingly untroubled manner, Marlow relates,

> I watched the coast. Watching a coast as it slips by the ship is like thinking about an enigma. There it is before you—smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering. Come and find out. This one was almost featureless, as it still in the making, with an aspect of monotonous grimness. (60)

In the final days before his life-altering experience in the Congo begins, Marlow seems more like himself (and Conrad) as a boy, standing before a map of the world with “white patch[es] for a boy to dream gloriously over” (52), trying to paint the “darkness” by “interpreting” the landscape he sees before him. He also suggests that the landscape *wants* to be given meaning, as it whispers, “Come and find out” (61). Soon, Marlow stumbles upon a way to comprehend the scenes he witnesses along the coast, fitting elements of what he sees into familiar narratives. While he remains unable to explain the

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46 Conrad details this anecdote at length in a revealing essay written late in his life, “Geography and Some Explorers” (*Last Essays*, 1926).
bizarre behavior of the whites on board his ship or the French man-of-war that is inexplicably “firing into a continent” (62), he suggests that the voices of two natural phenomena do possess meaning. The first, not surprisingly for a seaman, is the “voice of the surf” that represents “something natural, that had its reason, that had a meaning” to Marlow (61). More importantly, though, he identifies the “black fellows” he sees paddling boats to and from the ship as being “a great comfort to look at” (61). While he insists that this comfort derives from their “wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf” (61), there is a strong sense here that the Africans’ “vitality” also fits into more familiar and stereotypical visions of Africans as (however noble) savages driven solely by emotion—the kinds of characterizations, in other words, that dominate the fiction of Haggard and his fantastical depiction of European adventurers on the “dark” continent. Stymied by the incongruities of his experiences in the Congo, Marlow mirrors both Almayer and the narrator of An Outcast of the Islands as he attributes meaning to the African coast by falling back (however unconsciously) on stereotypical portrayals of the visitors from that coast.

The “Lesser” Imperialists: Keeping Up Appearances

While Kurtz’s life and death most clearly transform Marlow’s view of the world and of imperialism’s place within it, his journey toward accepting the need for a usable story, even one based on disturbing ideas or beliefs, owes a great deal to his encounters with three European imperialists who have survived their time in the Congo against long odds: the accountant, the manager, and the brickmaker. Indeed, part of Marlow’s grudging respect for these men arises from his amazement at their survival, as if they
must have discovered some secret in the wilderness to claim such remarkable longevity. But for a man who has already acknowledged a firm belief in the “idea” behind imperialism, Marlow similarly seems to attribute such endurance not so much to their physical routines or regimens as to a commitment to an “idea” of their own—a devotion, in other words, to a definitive version of the world and their place in it and to a narrative meant to explain and to justify their lives. Even as he investigates the motives and self-narratives of these imperialists, though, Marlow also finds himself confronting the senseless brutality that their survival allows to endure. What this ultimately creates in Marlow is a decidedly ambivalent recognition of the apparent necessity of self-narratives, even if such narratives lead to the suppression of countless others. This is an important step toward the sympathetic consciousness that he will achieve in the novella’s closing moments, but it is also clear that these lesser imperialists (my own term) fail to awaken any such sympathy from Marlow.

While the potential self-narrative of the young African remains beyond Marlow’s grasp, he very quickly meets another figure whose devotion to “civilized” life amidst the disorder and chaos of the Congo could not be more evident, the “chief accountant” of the Company. Emerging from the hellish gloom of the grove, Marlow initially describes the accountant in astonished tones as a phantom whose very existence seems improbable. When near the buildings I met a white man, in such an unexpected elegance of get-up that in the first moment I took him for a sort of vision. I saw a high starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clean necktie, and varnished boots. No hat. Hair parted, brushed, oiled, under a green-lined parasol held in a big white hand. He was amazing, and had a penholder behind his ear. (67)

Dressed in the garb of a European gentleman, the accountant appears as if he could have just as easily emerged from the Company offices in the sepulchral city as from the
substandard shack that now serves as his “office.” In case there were any doubt about his deliberate devotion to the fiction of “business as usual,” the accountant explains his presence to Marlow as the result of his need “to get a breath of fresh air” (68), with Marlow noting the “wonderfully odd” phrase’s “suggestion of sedentary desk-life” (68). Ignoring the dust and confusion around him, the accountant has purposefully chosen to dedicate himself to maintaining professional dress and a no-nonsense attitude that, at least initially, seems to command Marlow’s respect.

Moreover, I respected the fellow. Yes; I respected his collars, his vast cuffs, his brushed hair. His appearance was certainly that of a hairdresser’s dummy; but in the great demoralization of the land he kept up his appearance. That’s backbone. His starched collars and got-up shirt-fronts were achievements of character. He had been out nearly three years [. . . .] (68)

While the possibility for irony certainly seems potent in Marlow’s words, especially as he insists that “collars” and “shirt-fronts” could be representations of “character,” he seems to give the accountant a great deal of credit for maintaining a commitment to the “idea” of preserving his professional attire. Part of this esteem also seems due to his survival for three years in this foreign environment that has already caused Marlow a fair amount of consternation. But this dismay remains an important part of Marlow’s experience, especially as it becomes clear that the accountant’s unyielding fidelity to his appearance and duties keeps him from feeling any sympathy for those whose lives in no way approximate the “apple-pie order” of his (68).

Given his impeccable dress and dedication to continuing the “sedentary desk-life,” the accountant clearly believes that he can separate himself effectively from the

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47 The Oxford English Dictionary defines “got-up” as “artificially produced, elaborated, or adorned, for purposes of effect or deception.” While the accountant intends no deception (except arguably deceiving himself that all is under control), Marlow certainly points to the “effect” the accountant seeks to produce—the appearance of professionalism (perhaps deliberately overdone to stand out).
chaos around him. But, as Marlow’s stay at the outer station continues, reality inflicts itself on the accountant, exposing the darker features of the self-narrative to which he clings. The accountant’s “office” initially strikes Marlow as a successful refuge from the disorder of the station, but even its physical construction does not prevent the “outside” world from penetrating its space: “It was built of horizontal planks, and so badly put together that, as he bent over his high desk, he was barred from neck to heels with narrow strips of sunshine. There was no need to open the big shutter to see” (68-9). The physical realities of the station—the sight of the grove of death, the concussive sounds of meaningless blasting—constantly invade this attempted refuge. Yet, even when he must take in a dying agent, the accountant’s emotions remain effectively closed off from the tragedy contained in the agony he hears. “The groans of this sick person [. . .] distract my attention,” he laments. “And without that it is extremely difficult to guard against clerical errors in this climate” (69). While this indifference is troubling though not entirely surprising given his chosen self-narrative of professionalism and order, the accountant’s response to the shouting of Africans outside his office reveals more unsettling ideas that directly anticipate the violence of Kurtz: “When one has got to make correct entries, one comes to hate those savages—hate them to the death” (70). The accountant has survived three years in the Congo seemingly unscathed, yet his expression of deadly hatred does not seem far removed from Kurtz’s “Exterminate all the brutes!” What fills that distance and apparently restrains the accountant from acting on his hatred is, crucially, his abiding belief in a world of decorum and self-regulation. To move beyond his disgust to the actual murder of the Africans would be to remove himself from that self-maintained world and to satisfy irrational lusts at the price of losing his rational means of survival.
Even as Marlow recognizes his ability to survive and to achieve his work, he still finds the accountant’s indifference disconcerting, particularly his lack of sympathy. While leaving the accountant’s office for the final time, Marlow pauses on the threshold and, for a moment, ponders the disparate fates of those at the station.

In the steady buzz of flies the homeward-bound agent was lying flushed and insensible; the other, bent over his books, was making correct entries of perfectly correct transactions; and fifty feet below the doorstep I could see the still tree-tops of the grove of death. (70)

Marlow may find the accountant’s physical survival a fascinating defiance of his natural surroundings and even admire his uncompromising devotion to an idea, but he does not remain unaware of the consequences of this Company man’s actions. The accountant can do nothing to save the dying agent, of course, but his audacious complaints reveal the extent to which his insistence on order and control effectively dehumanizes even other white men at the outer station. And it is this ready ability to deny others their humanity that reminds Marlow that the self-narrative that helps the accountant to survive—the fiction of “business as usual” in such an unusual place—simultaneously perpetuates the stillness and silence of the grove of death.

While Marlow is impressed by the attire and steadfastness of the accountant while also questioning his emotional vacuity, much of his initial description of the manager of the Central Station insists on the inescapable ordinariness of this man who wields so much power and has survived so long in this strange place.

He was commonplace in complexion, in feature, in manners, and in voice. He was of middle size and of ordinary build. [. . .] [H]e could certainly make his glance fall on one as trenchant and heavy as an axe. But even at these times the rest of his person seemed to disclaim the intention. (73)
Marlow clearly finds the manager an unremarkable physical specimen, but he remains intrigued by the manager’s almost willful inscrutability (via his oddly affected smile), which he insists “inspire[s] neither love nor fear, nor even respect” but only “uneasiness” (73). Further pondering how this man who has “no genius for organizing, for initiative, or for order,” much less any “learning” or “intelligence,” could hold such a position, Marlow’s initial explanation for the manager’s importance relies solely on his ability to physically and psychically survive for nine years in the Congo. “He originated nothing, he could keep the routine going—that’s all,” Marlow affirms. “But he was great. He was great by this little thing that it was impossible to tell what could control a man” (74). Yet, while he may ultimately be unable to discover the full “secret” of the manager, Marlow nevertheless discerns important clues during his time at the Central Station. The first moment that reveals that the manager’s endurance has psychic as well as physical elements comes in his response to “the constant quarrels of the white men about precedence,” which is to have “an immense round table” constructed (74). In an instance where Marlow exposes the manager’s egoism as well as his recognition that those working for him carry that same egoism, Conrad’s narrator observes, “Where he [the manager] sat was the first place—the rest were nowhere. One felt this to be his unalterable conviction” (74). The benign implications of this choice reveal the manager’s skill at manipulating his subordinates, since the table that allows him to feel secure in occupying the “first place” also simultaneously allows each of his fellow diners to believe the same about himself. However, Marlow’s words also expose the limitations of the worldview held by a great number of the Company men he encounters (including the

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48 It should also be noted that the manager finds his inspiration from a much older imperial “story,” the Arthurian legend, in this moment.
accountant, of course). For they deliberately respond to the crisis they face by devoting all of their energy to maintaining their “place” while ignoring the desperation and starvation of those around them—both Africans as well as sick and dying Europeans. Existing in what Marlow calls “this cleared speck on the earth” surrounded by the “silent wilderness” that remains beyond their control or comprehension, the Company men still seek to exercise control over their fates the only way they can, by manipulating each other.

While Marlow initially believes that the manager has survived almost without a story, the manager’s behavior and, even more significantly, his words eventually betray him. At worst, the manager’s initial conversation with Marlow reveals a man guilty only of an annoying blend of imperial egoism and what we might call a “Darwinian arrogance” (his brash confidence that he is and will remain immune to the diseases that continually fell other agents). Ultimately, though, Marlow discovers that the manager in fact depends on a story at least as familiar as the accountant’s “keeping up appearances,” for his life now relies on an engine of envy and resentment that further drives an arguably murderous neglect as Kurtz wastes away. And, despite Marlow’s many protestations that the meaning of both the sunken boat and the manager’s “inscrutable” smile escape him, his narration exposes his considerable doubts as to the authenticity of the manager’s concern for the man whose success he so deeply resents. Immediately after he is

49 Redmond O’Hanlon, in Joseph Conrad and Charles Darwin, makes perhaps the most overt critical case for Heart of Darkness being, at least in part, the story of the murder of one agent, Kurtz, at the hands of another, the manager. As is evident from my choice of “negligence,” I would hesitate to judge the “case” so emphatically. Conrad does certainly give his readers significant cause to question the manager’s role in Kurtz’s death. But, as a later passage makes clear, the manager seems to depend more on the wilderness that cannot conquer him to eventually eliminate Kurtz from his path to glory.
informed of the wreck—and before he has even met the manager—Marlow’s response clearly suggests that it may have been no accident.

I did not see the real significance of that wreck at once. I fancy I see it now, but I am not sure—not at all. Certainly the affair was too stupid—when I think of it—to be altogether natural. Still . . . But at the moment it presented itself simply as a confounded nuisance. (72, ellipses in original)

As he tries to capture his initial impression of this “affair,” Marlow seems to be actively assimilating this event with what he later learns about the manager. Even in his recounting of this episode, though, he is hesitant to suggest culpability on the manager’s part. While it would be easy to contend that this tentativeness reveals a nonjudgmental respect for the manager, this passage points more strongly, particularly in Marlow’s significant pause, to the idea that Marlow simply does not know the manager’s full intent in setting off in the steamer, however ill-fated the voyage. Marlow’s doubts are also clear in his narration of his first interview with the manager, as he notes how the manager seems to almost be following a script or at least offering prepared words. The manager pays little attention to what Marlow has to say, insistently lamenting how “very grave, very grave” Kurtz’s situation is and how “very, very uneasy” it makes him (75). In addition, partly due to his having heard a number of expressions of Kurtz’s greatness, Marlow quickly tires of the manager’s pronouncements of sympathy and concern. Despite his respect for the manager’s physical survival, Marlow does not seem entirely content to believe that he does not have a more personal narrative driving him, and Marlow’s doubts are soon supported by the manager’s own words.

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50Marlow also emphasizes how the manager’s words seem rehearsed by choosing only to quote these brief phrases instead of whole sentences spoken by the manager. The isolated nature of these quotations, in other words, almost overemphasizes how “scripted” they sound to Marlow’s ear.
Only days later, Marlow overhears an initially cryptic but ultimately revelatory conversation between the manager and his uncle that firmly establishes the manager’s true ambitions. Whether or not Marlow believes that the disastrous attempt to take the steamboat upriver was a deliberate act meant to delay any relief to Kurtz for a matter of months, the manager’s uncle quickly suggests a more passive means for Kurtz’s removal: the wilderness itself. “The climate may do away with this difficulty for you,” the uncle insists, offering an important corollary to the manager’s already established ability to endure that “climate” (89).\footnote{This passage, which serves as the opening of Part II, revisits vaguer moments and themes from Part I in addition to offering important exposition about Kurtz: Part II was the second of three monthly installments published between February and April 1899 in \textit{Blackwood’s Magazine}. Thus, at the end of an opening paragraph in which Marlow overhears only fragments of the conversation, Conrad feels compelled to add, “They had been talking about Kurtz” (90).} Expressing his frustration with a “wandering trader” (who seems to be Kurtz’s Russian disciple) who pillages ivory from the “natives,” the manager insists that the trader should be “hanged for an example,” once again drawing an enthusiastic response from his companion: “Certainly [. . .] get him hanged! Why not? Anything—anything can be done in this country” (91). Waking each day with the confidence not only of occupying the “first place” in a land where “anything can be done” but also of withstanding the climate so deadly to his fellow Europeans, the manager shows a willingness to await his long-overdue promotion, practically claiming the African wilderness as an ally in his quest to gain power and respect. As Marlow earlier explains, “[T]riumphant health in the general rout of constitutions is a kind of power in itself” (74). At the same time, Marlow has discovered the resentment and envy—and arrogance—at the heart of the manager’s self-narrative, and his description of the two speakers as they walk away points to a disdain that grows more blatant in his encounter with the brickmaker. “The sun was low;” Marlow relates, “and leaning forward...
side by side, they seemed to be tugging painfully uphill their two ridiculous shadows of unequal length, that trailed behind them slowly over the tall grass without bending a single blade” (92). Whatever political power the manager and his cohorts are able to wield in their petty way, Marlow remains unimpressed and seems convinced that these “ridiculous shadows” will have at best a negligible effect on the land they mean to conquer.

While the accountant and the manager’s selves remain partially hidden from Marlow, the brickmaker’s ready willingness to talk leads to a much more blunt and revealing picture of himself and the other imperialists at the Central Station. Marlow first meets the brickmaker as the latter converses with the manager. The manager abruptly departs, and the brickmaker confidentially invites Marlow into his hut. Before relating the conversation that he shared with the brickmaker, however, Marlow offers his listeners a strikingly unequivocal account of the Central Station’s distinctive atmosphere:

There was an air of plotting about that station, but nothing came of it, of course. It was as unreal as everything else—as the philanthropic pretence of the whole concern, as their talk, as their government, as their show of work. The only real feeling was a desire to get appointed to a trading-post where ivory was to be had, so that they could earn percentages. (78)

Drawn to the Congo by hopes of economic gain or fame—or, in rare cases, a deliberate and fairly benevolent intent to “improve” the natives—the Company men discover that all that lies behind the imperial stories they have believed is a life of indolence and death. Left with only the hollow “pretence” upon which their lives are now based, they allow their endless disappointment to create a poisoned atmosphere of plotting and suspicion. And such behavior, in turn, arises out of the “only real feeling” that endures beyond the failure of those imperial stories: the “desire to get appointed to a trading-post” and to gain
the treasure that many of them crave. As becomes quickly evident to Marlow, the brickmaker and others can only explain their own failure by blaming the ambitions of others, particularly Kurtz, whose widely known reputation certainly makes him the most likely target for such revulsion. Rather than pity his fellow workers, however, Marlow channels his growing disgust for the Company men he has encountered into willfully playing the role the brickmaker seems intent on assigning him—that of the usurper, of another member of the “new gang” who, like Kurtz, stands in their way. Seizing an opportunity to humor himself in the midst of an emotionally taxing time, Marlow scolds the brickmaker for reading “the Company’s confidential correspondence,” insisting, “When Mr. Kurtz [. . .] is General Manager, you won’t have the opportunity” (80). Marlow’s “great fun” creates its intended effect, as the brickmaker apologetically insists, “I don’t want to be misunderstood, and especially by you, who will see Mr. Kurtz long before I can have that pleasure” (80-1). More importantly, though, this submissive reply launches the brickmaker on an extended soliloquy on the “necessity for every man to get on” (83), ultimately offering a broader metaphor for how these men have responded both to the natural world around them and to the vacuum left behind by their failed imperial dreams.

In the fourth and final essay of *The Dialogic Imagination*, “Discourse in the Novel.” Mikhail Bakhtin presents a specific conception of the “decentering” of language and culture that is important to understanding *Heart of Darkness*. Offering his vision of what moving beyond “national myth” would look like, Bakhtin argues,

The resistance of a unitary, canonic language, of a national myth bolstered by a yet-unshaken unity, is still too strong for heteroglossia to relativize and decenter literary and language consciousness. This verbal-ideological decentering will occur only when a national culture loses its sealed-off and
self-sufficient character, when it becomes conscious of itself as only one among other cultures and languages. (370)

This “decentering” closely captures what was beginning to occur during the period that I am examining, as aggressive imperial efforts took Europeans deeper into locations and cultures wholly foreign to their homogeneous upbringing “back home.” Taking the main thrust of this argument, we can see a similar process occurring on an individual level as Marlow comes to grips with his experience in the Congo. For what his words and deeds make clear as he recounts his final days there is his growing awareness of the reality (and, to some extent, the legitimacy) of other cultures, which he sees through other stories (or, using my term, self-narratives) whose existence he is willing to affirm without hearing even a word of them. This recognition of alternative stories beyond his own culture initially drives a fierce indifference in him, as he disbelieves the core parts of racist and imperial ideology while still obsessing on the “ugliness” and apathy that affirming such a “kinship” inspires. Only later, after he has (partially) recovered from his ordeal and as he relives his interview with the Intended, will this indifference transform, in a moment of overpowering human sympathy, into a more accepting recognition of the need for a usable self-narrative—a “saving illusion” in his words—that may indeed define the human experience.

“Now I Will Never Hear Him”: The Helmsman, Kurtz, and Marlow’s Complex Sympathy

At least since Achebe’s famous charges of racism in Conrad’s novella, a great deal of critical attention has been devoted to Marlow’s representations of Africans in general as well as his specific interactions with a number of them. The narrative’s lack of
intelligible African speech has been fully noted and criticized, but other critics have carefully considered Marlow’s direct interactions with a number of Africans during his tale to reveal the complex mixture of sympathy and racism that defines these encounters. For, in these moments, we see Marlow (in Hunt Hawkins’ words) “recognize, or almost recognize, or struggle to recognize the humanity of the Africans”—a fitting depiction of the enigmatic and uneven nature of Marlow’s thoughts and behavior (372). Further, Paul B. Armstrong insists that “Marlow’s appreciation of contingency allows him to approach others across cultural barriers with a sympathy and imagination remarkable for his time” while still affirming that “[t]ruly reciprocal, dialogical understanding of the Other is the unrealized horizon which this text points to but does not reach” (431, 437). From the “grove of death” to the attack on the steamer near Kurtz’s Inner Station, Marlow’s curiosity leads him to closely observe and examine the consequences of imperialism on the Africans whom it seeks to “improve.”

In his first few minutes after arriving at the Outer Station, Marlow is confronted by a stark vision of life in this place of “inhabited devastation” (63) as he views the men resting and dying in the “grove of death” (70) and especially as he interacts with a young black man who has tied worsted around his neck. Marlow, showing a capacity for almost instinctive pity that he demonstrates in his other tales (most notably toward Jim in Lord Jim), offers some biscuits to the young man, whose only response is to clasp them. Such a vacant reaction sparks Marlow’s curiosity, and he ponders what meaning the man places on this piece of worsted:

He had tied a bit of white worsted round his neck—Why? Where did he get it? Was it a badge—an ornament—a charm—a propitiatory act? Was there any idea at all connected with it? It looked startling round his black neck, this bit of white thread from beyond the seas. (67)
Having insisted of the figures in the “grove of death” only moments earlier that “[t]hey were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now” (66)—and thus openly denying the categories assigned to them under imperial ideology—Marlow shows a distinct willingness to turn his curiosity onto this unique talisman and its potential to reveal the driving narrative of its owner. Is it a proof of honor, an object meant to ward off evil, or a signal of submission, Marlow wonders. In a moment of apparent color-blindness on his part, Marlow demonstrates a curiosity about how this worsted fits into the young African’s own version of the world that points to a larger belief in the African’s ability to construct such a self-narrative. Further, just as he will soon dwell on the astonishingly white clothes of the Accountant, Marlow’s thoughts linger on this bit of white thread, and this equivalence is not insignificant. For, though Marlow has less hope of discovering the African’s “story” and how the worsted functions within it (if it does at all), his recognition that the young man may very well have developed a narrative that allows him to survive is crucial in anticipating his eventual attitude at the novel’s close. Just as Almayer turns to the natural world around him and just as the imperialists Marlow will soon meet keep up imperial “appearances,” the young African whom Marlow briefly encounters seems to have reappropriated a bit of cloth from the “civilized” world for his own purposes. And yet, as remains clear from this moment’s symbolism, the worsted also inevitably suggests the yoke of imperialism that has left him in this desolate and malnourished state. That this situation is perpetuated by the narratives of those who control him becomes clear only moments later, as he encounters the incongruous Accountant intent on keeping up appearances.
Having developed a thorough disgust for the noxious atmosphere of the Central Station—one fueled by the desperate attempts of the Company men to find usable self-narratives that drive them either to routine or to fierce envy—Marlow finds release as he begins his voyage toward Kurtz. More importantly, though, this tense expedition gives him time to consider his own response to this dilemma. At the same time, while some of his fellow whites accompany him on this trip, Marlow also has time and opportunity to observe the Africans who form his crew both during times of studied indolence and in the heartbreaking moments following the deadly attack that they endure near Kurtz’s Inner Station. As he continues to adapt to this strange new world, Marlow’s initial interest in the imperial self-narratives that the Company men have developed grows into a broader interest in even the decidedly nonimperial narratives that underlie the Africans’ somber behavior and seemingly inexplicable restraint. As Marlow both relives and relates the haunting days that precede his confrontation with Kurtz, he moves from pithy and matter-of-fact claims about the Africans that display expected Victorian prejudices to a more affirmative vision of his fellow workers as equally dependent on stories to survive. He may not give them much of a voice in his narrative—only clipped phrases, as more than a few critics have pointed out—but he does recognize that they have a voice (and, at least potentially, a story), though they remain beyond his comprehension.\footnote{The silence of African voices in \textit{Heart of Darkness} has sparked a number of explanations over the years. The most recent example is Benita Parry’s essay \textquotedblleft The Moment and Afterlife of \textit{Heart of Darkness},\textquotedblright in which she explains how the novella’s \textquotedblleft deliberated linguistic obscurity gestures toward meanings that the novel cannot understand, but that are perceived as \textit{there} and awaiting a time when they will be spoken\textquotedblright (41, original emphasis).}

The debate about the presence of racism within Marlow’s narrative—and how much we can connect it with Conrad—has raged for more than three decades and shows
little sign of ending anytime soon.\textsuperscript{53} This is largely because of the enigmatic nature of passages such as this oft-quoted one:

\begin{quote}
[T]here you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were— No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours— the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself [\ldots] a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you [\ldots] could comprehend. (96)\textsuperscript{54}
\end{quote}

Marlow’s intent with these words seems to lie in revealing this nebulous and unnerving “kinship” between him and the Africans he encounters, but his language is infected by the binary notions of Victorian society and science. Thus, he makes a plea for shrinking the distance between the two “races” but sounds decidedly racist (especially to our modern ears) while doing so. What I ultimately want to argue, though, is that even Marlow’s alleged “racism” is not a static thing—that Marlow’s opinion of the Africans around him transforms significantly as his recognition of the need for self-narrative evolves in a broader context. And both processes are evident as Marlow discusses a series of figures through the remainder of the novella: two Africans, the fireman and the helmsman aboard his steamer, Kurtz, and his Intended. His description of the fireman

\textsuperscript{53}Chinua Achebe is certainly the most well-known critic to accuse Conrad of racism, plainly calling him a “bloody racist” in his lecture “An Image of Africa” some thirty years ago (given as a speech in 1975; originally published as an essay in 1977 and subsequently revised in 1988). Some have agreed to a greater or lesser degree with Achebe’s broad charge, while others, including James Clifford and Abdul JanMohamed, have given Conrad credit for calling into question imperial practice and ideology while perhaps falling short of fully questioning the racial ideology of his time.

\textsuperscript{54}It is also important to note that, as Hunt Hawkins has pointed out, both Darwin and his contemporary Alfred Russel Wallace shared almost identical sentiments about realizing this uncomfortable kinship in their own writings (Darwin in \textit{The Descent of Man} (1871), Wallace in “The Origin of Human Races and the Antiquity of Man” (1864)). Marlow’s sense of the “ugliness” of this kinship, then, was certainly nothing new at the turn of the century but had been made explicit by some of the keenest scientific minds of the Victorian era decades before Conrad’s writing career began.
displays a moment in which conventional racial attitudes of his time win out over hints at a more progressive view:

[.. .] I had to look after the savage who was fireman. He was an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler. He was there below me, and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind-legs. A few months of training had done for that really fine chap. (97)

More than anything, this passage shows Marlow’s potent, almost overpowering, awareness of his immediate audience, as he stoops once again to comparing the fireman to a faithful and “trained” dog while also punctuating his claim with a forced and incongruous reference to him as “a really fine chap.” What is perhaps most striking about this odd moment, in fact, is the degree to which such a phrase seems forced, particularly when we consider that Marlow’s attention to his audience and their opinions will grow less and less important as he moves toward the sympathy that emerges in him in the story’s final episode. Yet we can explain this oddness particularly in terms of the argument of this chapter, for Marlow, by undercutting his description of improvement with crude and animalistic metaphors, deliberately tells his immediate audience (at least in this brief moment) the kind of story they expect and even want to hear. And this dissonance also recalls Conrad’s own dilemma, since his novella would appear in Blackwood’s Magazine right alongside other, more triumphant visions of imperialism and would be read by the white, well-to-do men who dominated the magazine’s subscribers (and whom J.A. Hobson would claim as the primary agents of imperialism in his 1902 work Imperialism). But such attempts to cater to their racist and superior attitudes do not long endure, for Marlow or for Conrad, especially in rather direct attacks on their comfort and arrogance near the end of his tale.
In a crucial scene during which Marlow’s steamer is attacked, one that leads to the death of his African helmsman and seems to confirm Kurtz’s death, Marlow’s growing respect for his African crew, developed during the relative torpor of the voyage, collides with his anticipatory grief of Kurtz in a moment of profound sympathy. While Ian Watt and others have focused on Marlow’s “delayed decoding” of the attack’s inception—his astonishingly slow realization that the “sticks” flying through the air are in fact deadly arrows—it is Marlow’s behavior once he realizes not just the attack but the swiftly approaching death of the helmsman that suggests a marked change in his racial attitudes. Recognizing that other imperialists like the manager and the accountant possess a need for a self-narrative beyond imperial ideals is not a difficult task for Marlow, himself a European and, to some degree, an imperialist who faces the same dilemma. But his description of the helmsman’s final moments—coupled with his earlier recognition of the Africans’ restraint that he cannot understand but that he also identifies as stemming from a specific motivation with an accompanying story—suggests that he sincerely longs to hear the secret of this African and his self-narrative, not unlike how he seeks to understand other whites and, ultimately, Kurtz:

We two whites [Marlow and another Company man] stood over him, and his lustrous and inquiring glance enveloped us both. I declare it looked as though he would presently put to us some question in an understandable language; but he died without uttering a sound, without moving a limb, without twitching a muscle. Only in the very last moment, as though in response to some sign we could not see, to some whisper we could not hear, he frowned heavily [. . .] (112, emphasis added)

Increasingly troubled by the cruel and inhuman enterprise of imperialism in the Congo, Marlow longs to hear even one intelligible word from one of its victims, perhaps a pronunciation on his life, perhaps only a word of recognition or of kinship. But he also
remains painfully aware of his utter inability to understand not only the silence of the wilderness around him but, more crucially, the silence and restraint of the Africans around him. Marlow is, of course, disappointed in this desire and also quickly informed by his companion, “I suppose Mr. Kurtz is dead as well by this time” (113). In a moment in which Marlow expresses at length his grief and “extreme disappointment” over never meeting Kurtz, he insists, “I didn’t say to myself, ‘Now I will never see him,’ or ‘Now I will never shake him by the hand,’ but, ‘now I will never hear him’” (113). Somewhat surprisingly for a narrator who often (though by no means always) demonstrates a substantial degree of self-awareness, Marlow, though he does dwell on the fact that his “sorrow had a startling extravagance of emotion” (114), never identifies what drives this multilayered sorrow, the helmsman’s shocking and sudden death and the emptiness of watching him die without hearing him. For, as becomes clear when Marlow admits of Kurtz, “I am not prepared to affirm the fellow was exactly worth the life we lost in getting to him” (119), the fates of both Kurtz and the helmsman, as well the impact of their deaths on his life, remain inextricably linked in Marlow’s memory.

Immediately after this surprising confession, Marlow expands on his earlier muted expressions of grief by insisting, “I missed my late helmsman awfully,—I missed him even while his body was still lying in the pilot-house” (119). Traveling up the Congo in the company of Europeans who thoroughly disgust him, Marlow realizes only after his death the “subtle bond” that he has developed with this African who helped steer him toward another European who will also inspire a measure of revulsion. “[H]e had done something, he had steered,” Marlow affirms (119), in a moment that reveals his respect for the honest work that the helmsman performed—the exact kind of work that Marlow
has already announced as most crucial to his own survival. For, in a revelatory moment at
the end of his discussion of the brickmaker, Marlow confesses, “I don’t like work—no
man does—but I like what is in the work,—the chance to find yourself. Your own
reality—for yourself, not for others—what no other man can ever know” (85). In
addition, the parallels between Marlow’s description of the helmsman’s final moments
and those of Kurtz are inescapable, both in the “profundity” of each man’s final gaze and
in what Marlow finds ultimately lacking in their lives. After insisting that the look that he
and the dying helmsman share “remains to this day in my memory—like a claim of
distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment,” Marlow jarringly adds, “Poor fool! If
he had only left that shutter alone. He had no restraint, no restraint—just like Kurtz . . .”
(119). In a moment that is, in a way, more surprising than his affirmation of his bond with
the helmsman, Marlow’s willingness to blame the helmsman for his lack of restraint
(after his protracted explanation of the Africans’ inexplicable restraint) exposes just how
intertwined his memories of Kurtz and the helmsman truly are.

At this point in the text, it would seem that Marlow is already approaching a
broader acceptance of a human need for self-narrative. But the combination of Marlow’s
still mixed feelings about this moment and an untimely comment from one of his listeners
about the absurdity of such sentiments drives him instead to launch into an acidic
statement of indifference toward all the voices he heard in the Congo and since. Insisting
that they could not possibly understand, given the comforts of society (with “a butcher

55 By comparison, Marlow says of Kurtz’s countenance in the moments immediately preceding his infamous
cry of “The horror!” “Anything approaching the change the came over his features I have never seen
before, and hope never to see again. [. . .] I saw on that ivory face the expression of somber pride, of
ruthless power, of ruthless despair.”
round one corner, a policeman round another”), and bitterly explaining how he was still destined to hear Kurtz’s voice, Marlow sums up his encounter with the “great” man:

Oh, yes, I heard more than enough. And I was right, too. A voice. He was very little more than a voice. And I heard—him—it—this voice—other voices—all of them were so little more than voices—and the memory of that time itself lingers around me, impalpable, like a dying vibration of one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean, without any kind of sense [. . .] (115)

The character and narrator who has so painstakingly listened and observed throughout his Congo experience, conducting his “on the spot” study of both the Company men and those whom they exploit and degrade, reveals the immense emotional and psychic toll of his journey in declaring all of the lies and pretension and unintelligible languages to constitute a modern Babel, a “jabber” that drives an ugly world that demands much of its inhabitants. And yet, like many of Marlow’s darkest and most pessimistic statements in his narrative, even this moment reveals a potential for a slightly more affirmative vision of the nexus between selves and stories. “The earth for us is a place to live in,” Marlow declares, “where we must put up with sights, with sounds, with smells, too, by Jove!—breathe dead hippo, so to speak, and not be contaminated” (117). More than describing the Congo’s daily assault on his senses, Marlow here insists that life demands that one “put up with”—that is, tolerate, though certainly not necessarily appreciate—the realities of what was fast becoming an increasingly complex and multicultural world. At the same time, though, Marlow’s pronouncement still reveals a latent disgust with such a world, as a deeper understanding of other cultures continues to elude him. Still, his reluctant acknowledgment of the multicultural space he has entered, even with its accompanying antipathy, allows him to move forward without open hostility toward the Africans. Failure to achieve even Marlow’s level of tolerance, however, as he soon discovers in the
pathetic and broken figure of Kurtz, could prove dangerous or even fatal not only for individual imperialists but for imperial nations themselves.

“*I Think the Knowledge Came to Him at Last*”:
*Marlow’s Mythology of Kurtz’s Death*

While other imperialists whom Marlow meets—the accountant, the manager, the brickmaker—successfully maintain their psyches through a strong belief in their new self-narratives, stories that effectively obscure the darker implications of their involvement with the Company, Kurtz represents a decidedly more complex case. It seems evident, particularly from his infamous report for the “International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs” (118), that Kurtz likely internalized the benevolent intentions of what Kipling would come to call the “white man’s burden” more completely than the other Company men. “By the simple exercise of our will,” Kurtz’s report announces, “we can exert a power for good practically unbounded” (118). It is also clear, however, from that report’s later postscript (“Exterminate all the brutes!”) that, by violently plundering and murdering his African “enemies” and by setting himself up as a local deity (a possibility that he had already identified in his report), he has attempted a more profound abandonment of the grand narrative of imperialism than any of the Company men whom Marlow meets. Certainly Marlow’s narrative would have us believe that Kurtz’s death ultimately stems from a physical illness; but what also becomes clear in Kurtz’s final days is how incomplete his abandonment of imperial narratives has

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56 Kurtz’s Intended, as we will see, also represents a complex case. As opposed to the lesser imperialists’ willful ignorance of colonial misdeeds in their self-narratives, the Intended’s own “saving illusion” is truly that—an “illusion” based on her limited knowledge of Kurtz’s behavior in the Congo. This may help to explain his more ready sympathy for her behavior than for that of the many imperialists he encounters in Africa.
been—that is, that part of his “madness” may stem from his inability to fully contain the hypocrisy (and hybridity) of his life. During his final days, as his physical strength fades, the eloquence that once allowed Kurtz to compose a startlingly effusive manifesto on the imperial mission is similarly crippled, escaping his lips only in broken, incomplete fragments of moral and imperial maxims. What is revealed by these clipped pronouncements entails not only the partial survival of Kurtz’s initially intense belief in these ideas but also compelling evidence of how the acquisitive and exploitative underpinnings of imperialism have fully permeated Kurtz’s ego—and how the imperial “ethic” has triumphed over more traditional morality in this man who is, after all, a product of “All [of] Europe” (117). Playing at hybridity—embracing enough of the local customs and beliefs to install himself as a deity among the Africans and gain unquestioned control over the ivory of the region—rather than fully embracing it, Kurtz perishes while Marlow, whose experience allows him to develop a reluctant but authentic respect for the Africans he encounters, lives on to tell his inescapably dark but profoundly important tale.

As the steamer that bears Kurtz’s dying body travels rapidly toward the coast, Marlow’s attention turns away from the uncertain shadows of the surrounding jungle to the more deeply disturbing “shadows” that surround Kurtz.

Oh, he struggled! he struggled! The wastes of his weary brain were haunted by shadowy images now—images of wealth and fame revolving obsequiously round his unextinguishable gift of noble and lofty expression. My Intended, my station, my career, my ideas—these were the subjects for the occasional utterances of elevated sentiments. (147)

Once fully imbued with the spirit of imperial improvement and generosity, Kurtz’s experience of the breakdown of the imperial ideas he once so fully embraced has driven a
relentlessly selfish quest to achieve in Africa a level of power and distinction that Europe has denied him. Rejected by the Intended’s family because of how little he possesses, Kurtz spends his final days insistently lauding his unbounded control of his African life (“My Intended, my station, my career, my ideas”). In the hollowness of his final days, all that remains of his “immense plans” (143) are such fleeting “images of wealth and fame,” proof that Kurtz internalized the acquisitive aspect of the imperial project so fully that nothing that he has claimed has been for God and Country but solely for himself. But what is more significant about this reality—that Kurtz has, through his own selfish motives, caused the destruction of his and many other lives—is how Kurtz’s failings, particularly his abandonment of imperialism’s benevolent aspects, demonstrate on a personal level the irreconcilable conflict at the heart of imperial ideology and practice. In other words, because Kurtz is such a true believer of this imperial ideology, his failure powerfully indicts the imperial stories that he came to believe. Having grown increasingly skeptical of such stories at least since he left the Company offices in Europe, Marlow’s interest during Kurtz’s final days falls largely on Kurtz’s success and yet ultimate failure to manipulate his world through stories. Sent forth from the sepulchral city, an “emissary of light” whose task was to transform the Congo into a space that conformed with the story of imperial conquest and improvement, Kurtz founders in a space whose complexity eventually overwhelms him. Thus, Marlow ultimately considers Kurtz not just a villain but also a victim not only of imperial stories but also of the “unspeakable” stories of the African wilderness and its inhabitants, a man devoured by the myriad competing narratives of the colonial world. And what such a complicated
explanation of Kurtz’s fate also reveals is the account of Kurtz’s life that Marlow himself needs to believe in order to move forward with his life.

Ultimately, most of Marlow’s grudging admiration for Kurtz arises from his ability to seize control over those who surround him at the Inner Station, both the Africans and his Russian disciple.

Whatever he was, he was not common. He had the power to charm or frighten rudimentary souls into an aggravated witch-dance in his honour; he could also fill the small souls of the pilgrims with bitter misgivings: he had one devoted friend at least, and he had conquered one soul in the world that was neither rudimentary nor tainted with self-seeking. (119)

For a time, Kurtz—by force of character, by the threat of and use of violence, and ultimately by playing the central role in the story of his own deity—has dominated his environment and deliberately embodied the reality that he describes in his own “peroration”: that “we whites . . . must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings” (118). Yet it is his personal conquest of another “white,” the Russian harlequin who greets Marlow at the Inner Station, that reveals the full extent of Kurtz’s manipulative schemes. A veritable orphan who has fallen under Kurtz’s immense sway,57 the Russian reveals, through his eager and uninhibited explanations, how completely Kurtz’s stories and threats have consumed his self. Pondering an individual whom he describes as “an insoluble problem,” Marlow, a man deeply troubled by the complex colonial world that he has encountered, expresses astonishment and even a quiet sense of jealousy over the Russian’s way of life.

I was seduced into something like admiration—like envy. Glamour urged him on, glamour kept him unscathed. He surely wanted nothing from the wilderness but space to breathe in and to push on through. His need was to

57Marlow’s descriptions of the Russian are rather insistent about the childishness of his appearance and his behavior. Possessing a “beardless, boyish face,” Kurtz’s disciple departed the African coast for the interior with “no more idea of what would happen to him than a baby” (122, 124).
exist [. . . .] If the absolutely pure, uncalculating, unpractical spirit of adventure had ever ruled a human being, it ruled this be-patched youth. (126)

Marlow’s description here implies that the Russian has adopted a simple, even utopian approach to this newly globalized space. The Russian holds no personal agenda or animosities, and he makes no demands on those around him. But the darker realities of this seemingly innocuous existence become quickly evident, for the simplicity of the Russian’s life comes only with the almost total loss of his self. His beliefs are no longer his, but those of Kurtz; his explanation of Kurtz’s rise to power relies not on his own thoughts or reactions but instead echoes the formal diction and metaphors of Kurtz’s report. This unquestioning acceptance of his personal god’s words and ideas, Marlow explains, “seemed to have consumed all thought of self so completely, that even while he was talking to you, you forgot that it was he—the man before your eyes—who had gone through these things” (126-27). This realization leads Marlow to his most anguished expression of despair in his entire narrative, but the Russian, like Kurtz, continues to discourse, in the process revealing how Kurtz has conquered the space around him through words and deeds. More importantly, though, the Russian’s attempts to justify Kurtz’s behavior and to insist on his being above judgment offer a crucial and troubling precursor to Marlow’s own efforts to account for the life and death of Kurtz.

In a passage in which Marlow switches erratically between direct quotations and the filter of free indirect discourse, the Russian explains Kurtz’s rise to power as a local autocrat with “mingled eagerness and reluctance” (128). Tacitly agreeing that Kurtz has “raided the country,” he quickly seeks to justify these raids by insisting of the natives, “They adored him” (128). Speaking as if reading from Kurtz’s infamous report, the
Russian announces, “‘What can you expect? [. . .] he came to them with thunder and lightning, you know—and they had never seen anything like it—and very terrible. He could be very terrible. You can’t judge Mr. Kurtz as you would an ordinary man’” (128).

History, as is often said, is written by the “victors,” and the Russian’s account of Kurtz’s behavior in and around the Inner Station partakes fully of the mythology of the “white man” who, through his superior technology and his willful leadership, has not only conquered the local tribes but compelled them to act on his behalf in what may have been skirmishes if not outright wars among such tribes. As his tale continues, the Russian also describes how Kurtz has been reluctant to abandon his “people” until this final illness of his life leaves him unable to do so, as if he has transformed into a benevolent despot in the wake of his brutal rise to power. Marlow listens with fascination and only the slightest degree of skepticism, not fully realizing that the Russian’s tale of Kurtz is, in many ways, just that—a tale, one that clearly seeks to paint him as a tragic hero. For, even as Marlow doubts the widespread adoration that the Russian claims for Kurtz—and as he insists that the shrunken heads placed atop poles at the station represent “nothing exactly profitable” (129)—he begins constructing his own story of Kurtz, one that sees his violent if not murderous acts with a clear eye while maintaining a firm belief in his recognition and renunciation of his transgressions.

Even as he acknowledges that “Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts,” Marlow remains steadfast in his belief in a moment of redemption, a “victory,” for the great and terrible man:

[T]here was something wanting in him—some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence. Whether he knew of this deficiency himself I can’t say. I think the knowledge came to him at last—only at the very last. (129)
Faced with a man so famous for his utterances yet who says so little of substance during his final days, Marlow the storyteller fills this vacuum with the fiction of Kurtz as a lost soul, one who is overwhelmed by his own lusts and desires in the unrestrained freedom of the Congo but who ultimately finds redemption by achieving a “moral victory” (151). “Mr. Kurtz’s reputation is safe with me,” Marlow assures his audience (139), and he seeks to protect that reputation by insisting that this man, whose “adventures” have so violently and indiscriminately destroyed the lives of the surrounding tribes, can successfully pronounce “a judgment upon the adventures of his soul” with only four whispered words (“The horror! The horror!”). Largely ignoring all that has preceded Kurtz’s dying words, Marlow insists that his enduring respect and loyalty to him depends solely on Kurtz’s ability to speak in the face of death:

He had summed up—he had judged. ‘The horror!’ He was a remarkable man. After all, this was the expression of some sort of belief; it had candour, it had conviction, it had a vibrating note of revolt in its whisper. It had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth—the strange commingling of desire and hate. (151)

Expanding the mythology of Kurtz and particularly of his final moments, Marlow continues to inflate the importance of these dying words, talking himself into confidence in his story even in this brief passage. His use of “after all” seems to press back against those (perhaps even the skeptic within him) who would doubt that “the horror” expressed anything of significance at all, and Marlow’s own reluctance shows itself in his decidedly tentative phrasing of “some sort of belief.” However, even by the end of the sentence, he has transformed these words into an articulation of “candour” and fully-formed “conviction” that also include “a vibrating note of revolt.” As Bruce Henricksen explains in *Nomadic Voices*,

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Marlow has no evidence to warrant the assertion that Kurtz’s soul gained a kind of victory or redemption (such things, though crucial, are unknowable), and he seems to have been swayed by an eloquence and theatricality—“it had a vibrating note”—that he is suspicious of everywhere else. We have a minimal story element, the fact that Kurtz uttered these words, and then we have, as a kind of halo surrounding them, Marlow’s interpretive discourse [ . . . ] (62).

And what this brief yet revelatory moment reminds us is that Marlow, as he tells his tale, is still creating and recreating the story of Kurtz even as he speaks.

Despite his quiet mocking of the simplistic maxims that Kurtz mumbles during his final days, as well as his overt ridicule of and incredulity over Kurtz’s “last disciple” (a phrase ultimately much more applicable to himself), Marlow possesses his own need to believe in Kurtz’s ultimate acknowledgement of the darkness of his actions, one that he does not initially comprehend. After a protracted ordeal during which he has repeatedly observed countless individuals’ need to believe in limited (if not wholly fictional) versions of the world, Marlow can only embrace the need for what he deems a “saving illusion” once he realizes that he shares this need in the presence of Kurtz’s Intended. Until he does, though, his bitterness over Kurtz’s death and his own near-death experience and, more importantly, his resentment of a society still functioning daily in a state of ignorance and insulation from the disturbing realities of the colonial project in Africa fuel a growing anger within him. Returning to the “sepulchral city,” the home of the colonial ambitions that have contributed to Kurtz’s death and that constantly threaten the lives of Europeans and Africans alike, Marlow readily admits an uncontrollable revulsion for the unknowing (or uncaring) citizens of the society around him:

They trespassed upon my thoughts. They were intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretence, because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew. Their bearing [ . . . ] was offensive to me like the outrageous flauntings of folly in the face of a danger it is
unable to comprehend. I had no particular desire to enlighten them, but I had some difficulty in restraining myself from laughing in their faces, so full of stupid importance. (152)

Thrust back into a world of relative homogeneity dominated by the “assurance” not only of safety but of cultural and moral superiority, a world-weary Marlow fiercely resents the serenity that his harrowing experience of the complex and heterogeneous world of the Congo has forever denied him. And, despite his half-hearted attempts to blame his behavior on a physical fever—“I admit my behaviour was inexcusable, but then my temperature was seldom normal in these days”—Marlow soon more candidly and crucially announces, “It was not my strength that wanted nursing, it was my imagination that wanted soothing” (152). In the short term, the only hope for such “soothing” lies in his belief that only he knows the “truth” about Kurtz’s life and death. Yet even this belief swiftly faces the troubling reality that, as Marlow discovers as several of Kurtz’s family and friends seek him out, no one knew or could have discovered the full truth of who this “remarkable man” was. By various accounts, Kurtz had been a “great musician,” “a painter who wrote for the papers, or else [. . .] a journalist who could paint,” or a man who “really couldn’t write a bit” but “would have been a splendid leader of an extreme party” (153-54). Everyone else, from the lesser imperialists to the Russian to those who knew Kurtz in Europe, clings to his own story of who Kurtz was, but Marlow still fails to realize what his encounters with these men reveal—that his own account of Kurtz and particularly of his dying moments is ultimately just as contingent, just as potentially illusory, as anyone else’s. Nor does he realize how much he depends on his belief in the final redemption of Kurtz, at least not until his encounter with the Intended finally forces him to face this crucial reality.
“The Certitude of My Sympathy”: Marlow, Pity, and the “Saving Illusion”

Central to many readings of *Heart of Darkness* as an essentially pessimistic or even nihilistic meditation on humanity is Marlow’s ultimate choice to allow Kurtz’s Intended to remain in ignorance of his violent misdeeds and ignoble death—what he finally labels the “great and saving illusion” to which she clings (159). And there is certainly no way to deny the bitterness and resignation that seem to dominate Marlow’s narration of their encounter. In addition, a great deal of criticism has been devoted to Marlow’s choice to “lie” to the Intended, both in terms of his ethical hypocrisy and his misogynistic justification for doing so. But what seems equally clear is how this scene forces Marlow to confront more fully his own stories, particularly if we understand the novella as an extended series of encounters that allow Marlow to discover the stories that others employ—and, in the process, to slowly apprehend the narratives and beliefs that he depends on. Talking with a woman who has “a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering” (all traits that Conrad consistently valued throughout his life), Marlow’s responses to her fierce need to believe in Kurtz’s inherent nobility are quite complex, as he wavers between respect and disdain, between anger and “infinite pity,” and between hope and resignation. And the climactic moment of their conversation, Marlow’s lie, reveals a similar balance between impulsive, even instinctive sympathy and a deliberate and measured choice to spare the Intended from the truth (at least as he sees it). As a number of critics and biographers have noted, Conrad felt strongly that this final scene held great importance as it elevated his novella beyond the story of one man in the wilderness. But its significance surpasses this reality, for what it reveals, beyond

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58 In a 1902 letter to publisher William Blackwood, Conrad explained, “[T]he interview of the man with the girl locks in—as it were—the whole 30000 words of narrative description into one suggestive view of a
Marlow’s emotional reactions to the Intended, is his determination to preserve the “Idea” that, however false, retains the potential for “salvation.”

The choice that Marlow faces as he approaches his meeting with Kurtz’s Intended—indeed, the choice that everyone with such intimate experience and knowledge of the sham of imperialistic endeavor in Africa has faced throughout Conrad’s novella—lies between fully accepting the truth as one knows it or creating deliberate fictions, even “illusions,” as a way to avoid such realities. It is also a dilemma that, at least in Marlow’s opinion, contributes directly to the death of Kurtz, that “shadow insatiable of splendid appearances, of frightful realities” (155). European society, at least in Marlow’s opinion, continues to choose the “splendid appearances” represented by the imperial mission and Kipling’s “white man’s burden” rather than the “frightful realities” described in a growing number of troubling reports of the barbarity of imperialistic governance in African colonies.59 But Marlow remains unsure whether he will expose the “frightful realities” of Kurtz’s life or “keep [them] back alone for the salvation of another soul” even as he enters the “high door” of the Intended’s home (156). Initially reacting to her with the same blend of awkward silence and stilted speech that he offers during his first encounter with the Russian, Marlow chooses to exercise an instinctive sympathy that has only been strengthened through the trials of his Congo ordeal.

Having gathered extensive and widely varied evidence of how the men in the Congo have employed self-narratives to cope with their chaotic lives, Marlow finds

himself unconsciously seeking the same kind of information from the moment the Intended enters the room. But he does so in a vastly different context and with a vastly different human being. Rather than discovering the stories that drive a mixture of disdain, envy, and even hate toward Kurtz and that also represent a response to the failure of imperial beliefs and imperatives, Marlow simultaneously ascertains and creates a story to explain the uninterrupted (and seemingly unstoppable) grief of Kurtz’s beloved, one who remains in ignorance of imperial failures and who maintains an unquestioning respect for and love of Kurtz. Observing her demeanor, Marlow at first believes that she takes a distinctive pride in her mourning, “as though she would say, I—I alone know how to mourn for him as he deserves” (157). But he quickly realizes, once she comes closer, that her despair remains as authentic and raw as when she first heard the news, the first but certainly not the last moment during this encounter that forces Marlow to realize how similar their two lives have become. For, just as Marlow continues to see and to hear echoes of Kurtz in the present, he finds himself unable to separate the Intended’s present grief from Kurtz’s dying declaration (like the Intended, Marlow is also “one of those creatures that are not the playthings of Time,” 157). Marlow enters this stately home convinced that he must face facts and even impose them on the Intended and that, by doing so, he can “surrender personally all that remain[s] of [Kurtz] with me” (155); but what soon becomes clear, as the Intended continues to talk of the Kurtz she knew, is that Marlow will be forced to acknowledge his own illusions, step by painful step.

Hearing the standardized story of Kurtz’s greatness that is recited to him more than once during his time in the Congo (to his increasing annoyance), Marlow finds himself compelled to recognize the degree to which his own insistence on Kurtz’s final
“moral victory” endorses the grand narrative of Kurtz’s greatness. “You knew him well,”
the Intended suggestively declares to Marlow, who can only reply, “I knew him as well
as it is possible for one man to know another” (158). Caught between his obvious
skepticism, his sympathy for the Intended, and his lasting esteem for Kurtz, Marlow goes
along with the Intended’s eulogy due to an uneasy union of unconscious sympathy for the
grieving woman before him and a conscious recognition that the words he echoes are also
words that he believes. “He was a remarkable man. [. . .] We shall always remember him.
[. . .] His words will remain,” Marlow announces at various points during their
conversation, reiterating ideas and beliefs to the Intended that his narrative has already
made clear to his audience (158, 160). Yet it is a moment that may represent an
unconscious slip—Marlow’s assertion that Kurtz’s death “was in every way worthy of his
life” (161)—that leads directly to the kind of lie that he so readily condemns. As
memories of Kurtz flood back upon him, and as the Intended makes her painful and
halting plea—“I want—I want—something—something—to—to live with”—Marlow
must, as he has earlier lamented of the Intended, bow his head “before the faith that was
in her, before that great and saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow in the
darkness” (161, 159). In the finale of a tale in which nearly every character has
demonstrated the need for at least some degree of “illusion” to endure the challenges of
life in the age of European imperialism, Marlow’s instinctive sympathy, in combination
with the lessons he has learned from his encounters with the lesser imperialists, the
African crew, Kurtz, and, finally, his Intended, leads him to accept the need for illusions
great and small in life. Further, as Conrad’s subsequent novels would suggest (especially
_Nostromo_) such acceptance represents a crucial and necessary step to defining a society
that transcends narrow ideologies to arrive at a greater respect for the heterogeneity of beliefs that would come to define the multicultural world of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.
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